

Night Heron with Zinnias in an Orb Vase with Marine Algae

I felt the full working title of this painting was too long and cumbersome to use in our gallery correspondence, but each of the named elements is important in its own way.

The heron in this painting is entirely due to “Merlin”, a phone app developed by the Cornell Ornithology Lab. I installed it on my phone last summer and immediately discovered a dozen bird species that I had no idea were living on our property. As the days (and nights) passed I found even more through the song identification option. I learned that we have blue headed vireos, four different woodpecker families, a great horned owl, seven types of warbler (and counting), the Great Blue Heron and two species of night heron, Black Crowned and Yellow Crowned.

The Maine coast is part of the Black Crowned Night Heron’s breeding territory. They are the most widely distributed heron in the world and can live in fresh, salt, or brackish marsh water. They’re most active at night but the phone app allows me to hear their presence even if they’re not immediately visible. Evidently we have a breeding couple in our bog but I’ve only heard them, and don’t know if they are raising a brood this year - I hope so! I’ve seen them several times in secluded beaches around the island so I know there’s a local population. I find their most visible feature to be their long white head plumes, quite distinctive at dusk. Their stern expression, deadly dagger-like beak, and bright red eyes make them an irresistible subject for a bird portrait.

These zinnias are the “State Fair Mix”, a sturdy old-fashioned variety about 30” tall that withstands the Maine garden season’s cool nights, hot days, and the occasional heavy thunderstorm with ease. The “mix” is a combination of fully saturated red, pink, and purple blossoms that are amazing to paint. The petals are just a bit luminous, making them an excellent choice for a dusk or low light composition.

Flower arranging was all the rage in suburban America in the sixties and early seventies, and my mother enjoyed classes and competitions in central Connecticut at the time. I have several of her vases and metal “frogs” for holding stems and they’re very useful in setting up still life paintings where each flower has to be “just so”. The black glass orb vase is from her collection.

Marine algae, in this case brown marine algae, are what we generally refer to as “seaweed” in the northern hemisphere. Brown algae are the major seaweeds of the temperate and polar regions. They are dominant on rocky shores throughout cooler areas of the world. I found this particular variety at Beach Road in Manset - there are approximately 2,000 species of brown algae and I have yet to identify this particular batch. I used them in this painting because they had a lovely color and transparency in low light, floating on the surface of the water and sand to provide a natural habitat for the heron.