



Words: Laura J. Moss
Images courtesy: Kathleen Maling

Maling creates colorful masterpieces so people can see the world through her eyes.

When Kathleen Maling moved from urban Miami to St. Augustine, Florida, in 2005, she was immediately taken with the region's alligators. The state is home to about 1.3 million of the reptiles, according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, so for Maling, an artist who specializes in watercolor, inspiration was everywhere.

"I was suddenly surrounded by gators, and I've just always been fascinated by them," Maling says. "They remind me of dinosaurs. I just love reptiles. I love the way the sun lights up the scales on their bodies. They're almost like puzzle pieces — whether it's a Komodo dragon or an alligator or a lizard. When you really look at them in the light, you can get all kinds of reflections off them. They're challenging because it is a lot of detail, and it does take a long, long time, but I think I just like the effect of their scales in a painting."

This is certainly evident in Maling's work, which is rich with detail and alive with light that reflects a variety of gorgeous colors that most people wouldn't associate with her favorite subject.

"Usually when you see a gator, it just looks muddy. It just sort of blends in with the scenery," she says. "But to me, they're beautiful animals, and to make them beautiful to other people is where the color comes in. It's always amazing

to me that people don't find gators and other reptiles beautiful, so I feel it's my job to show them what I'm seeing when I look at them."

Although Maling paints a lot of alligators — as did John Singer Sargent, whom she notes is one of her greatest inspirations — she also brings her unique style to many other subjects. She paints people, landscapes, plants and birds, to name a few, but she says animals are by far her preferred subject matter.

Before Maling begins a new watercolor, she visits parks and zoos and photographs a variety of potential subjects. Then she combs through the moments she's captured and determines which image most demands her attention. "I'll take photos of animals, landscapes, people, but I'm always drawn to the ones of the animals," she says. "I usually spend about a month on a painting because I like to work in detail, so I have to be excited about it from the beginning, and that subject needs to maintain my excitement, and usually animals do. They're what excites me."

When Maling is searching for inspiration, she doesn't only consider the subject she'll paint, but also how light interacts with it. "I have to look at my photos in different lights," she explains. "I especially like to look at them at nighttime with just an ambient light around, like a streetlight, to see the values better, the darks and the lights. When something has strong darks and lights, then I know I'm on the right track."

Once Maling has decided what to paint, she devotes a lot of time to first drawing her subject, being sure to capture every tiny detail she notes in the photo. Then she applies masking fluid to



Opening spread: Many of watercolor artist Kathleen Maling's paintings are inspired by the wildlife that surrounded her home in St. Augustine, Florida, where she lived for 13 years, especially alligators. This page: Maling works on a painting of a lizard in her home studio. Photo by Austin Olsen.









Her expert use of light and color makes the reptiles Maling paints, usually seen as brown or dull, jump from the paper. Top left: 'Komodo Dragon;' bottom left: 'Banana Tree;' right: 'Crocodile Underwater.'



the areas of the surface she wants to keep white. After that, she truly brings her subject to life. "I'm then free to throw color on wherever I want because I've got the skeleton down. I can really add any colors as long as I keep the darks and lights where they're supposed to be."

In addition to light and color, movement is another undeniable aspect of Maling's work. Whether it's a paddling kayaker, a laughing child or an alligator easing its way into the water, action is always visible in her paintings. She admits that she tends to avoid static objects and people because she enjoys the challenge of capturing movement.

Even her primary medium, watercolor, which she's been working with for 25 years, speaks to her fascination with movement. "I love the flow of watercolor and the mixtures that you get when paint hits the water and it just blossoms," she says. "It's something that you can't do with acrylics and oils. The way that the water interacts with the paint is addicting."

While Maling paints a lot of animals, especially reptiles, each work is as unique as the animal itself. Indeed, even her alligator watercolors are all distinctive, so it's no surprise that her work has caught the eye of numerous art organizations. She exhibits in shows throughout the year, has received several prestigious awards and has been honored by the Florida Watercolor Society, the American Watercolor Society and the National Watercolor Society.

There's no doubt that Maling's work has been heavily influenced by Florida's flora and fauna, but she says there may be some new influences in her work as she makes the move to Dallas, Texas, to be closer to family — and out of the path of hurricanes. Having lost belongings in three devastating hurricanes, she's ready to explore a



Although Maling has often painted reptiles and other animals, with her recent move from St. Augustine, Florida, to Dallas, Texas, she is seeking out new subjects to study and paint. Opposite page: 'Pirates with Red Cup,' this page: 'Egret.'

new landscape and see what moves her.

"I'm thinking people might actually be more in the future for me, but we'll see, because I'm still drawn to animals," she says. "I'd also like to use more ink. I joined the Urban Sketchers group, which is a global movement of people who meet once a month to sketch. When you're sketching outside, you have to be quick, and ink is a really good thing to use. I think I'll definitely spend more time just going outside and creating. I miss that when I paint from photographs, and it's a really nice feeling to be outside painting. I think it's really important for artists to go outside and paint from life."

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