

■ Three large hawks painted on a hillside in charcoal are the hallmark of earth artist Kelsi Anderson.



Kelsi Anderson

# Art of the Earth

Sebastopol's Kelsi Anderson creates massive paintings that probe our connection to our surroundings. Their presence is fleeting – and that's part of their story.

By MEG MCCONAHEY

**O**N A HILLSIDE OVERLOOKING A FARM deep in West Sonoma's forested Green Valley, an owl hovers, wings outstretched. She is a formidable bird, her wingspan extending some 150 feet, appearing from the fields below like a shadow on the earth.

She won't be staying long. As the grass grows, spinning from spring green to summer gold, she will, blade by blade, recede into the landscape. By late summer, she will be gone, with no visible trace except perhaps a bit of oyster shell in the soil or smattering of ochre pigment clinging to a blade of grass.

This is exactly as artist Kelsi Anderson of Wild Earth Art intended. Using natural pigments and a spray gun with a 100-foot cord as a brush—her “magic wand” as she playfully calls it—she spends several weeks painting a piece into the natural landscape that, by design, will last only a few days or weeks. Her extraordinarily detailed sand drawings, raked onto a beach, vanish even more quickly, overtaken by wind and tide.

Anderson may feel slightly wistful, but she won't mourn, for her art is not meant to last and is as much about its making—the process, “the dance with nature,” as she calls it. “Part of the awareness of the piece is that everything is always changing. It has both the elements of surprise and spontaneity,” she says of her singular medium and method of creating ephemeral art in the natural landscape. “When is a painting going to appear and when is it going away? That makes you feel and be really present when you realize, ‘This won't last.’”





■ Anderson mixes her natural pigments by hand. The pigments are designed to break down soon after application. Iron oxide, clay, and calcium carbonate work to nourish the soil as they break down.

Anderson, a Petaluma native, studied traditional fine art and environmental studies at New York University, where she was mentored by a like-minded environmental artist who stalked nature in one of the most built environments in the world. “We were doing a lot of work directly in the city” she says, “finding all the hidden streams in Manhattan and the different urban gardens. It was amazing. But now I’m in the complete opposite space.”

She has an indoor studio at her home in Forestville. But these days, she revels in her outdoor studio at Green Valley Farm + Mill, a 19th-century homestead where farmers, artists, gardeners, herb growers, and other makers share a sylvan space.

In a green jumpsuit spackled with pigment and boots blackened with iron oxide powder, the 35-year-old artist explores the land for possibilities. In her three years experimenting with equipment and developing a technique

for a process few other artists have tried—she found only one artist in France doing the same thing but senses it’s “in the ether now”—she has painted birds on a hill, a snake in a meadow, a group of owls in flight.

Before embarking on a piece, she sits in her chosen spot, quietly meditating and tuning in to the birds and animals, wildflowers and trees, waiting for an image to appear to her. The process, she says is spiritual as well as creative. “I do a lot of imagery with birds. There are a lot of barn owls and great horned owls in this valley and in these barns and I wanted to pay homage to the species that live here.”

Once she has her theme she will take photos of the site and sketch out an image in a notebook. She had to learn how to work on a whole different scale proportionally, as well as to decide what vantage point she wants the image to be seen from. “I want this to look good and realistic from where we’re standing, so people passing by can appreciate it,” she says.

As she works, she is also stewarding the land. The pigments that she uses—iron oxide, clay, calcium carbonate—nourish the soil. She is careful not to disturb native grasses and wildflowers, even if it leaves a splotch in the finished piece. “So even in the act of preparing the canvas there is ecological remediation work that is going on. And that too is my background and my passion and my love,” says the artist, who also has a business designing and installing eco-friendly landscapes that welcome wildlife.





Earlier in her career, Anderson made naturally pigmented earthen walls for building interiors. She has also worked with artist Andres Amador to create designs on beaches along the Sonoma and Mendocino coast. “That work is not only site-specific, but you have to work with the tides. There are just those windows when there are super-low tides. It’s fun and another way to get in synch with nature but also limiting,” she says.




■ Two recent earth art works Anderson created at rural beaches along the North Coast. The designs are raked into the sand with hand tools and disappear with the tides.

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■ Anderson applies natural pigments to a hillside with an industrial paint sprayer. It's strenuous work at times, as she hauls buckets of pigment and wrestles with equipment.

Whether working with sand or soil, the satisfaction for Anderson is in the creation. She likens landscape art to urban graffiti and street art, work she finds “stunning” but “extremely toxic.” She would rather play gently with nature and embrace the impermanence. She says her work illuminates the natural spirit of the land, drawing people to places of sanctuary.

In the future, she hopes to partner with land conservation groups on installations, like the wide-scale salmon painting she created last year to celebrate a local stream restoration project. “I deeply believe in public art that is accessible to all,” she says, “creating work that makes people want to engage with the environment.” 



### Conquering the Wild

Kelsi Anderson of Wild Earth Art creates large-scale projects on properties throughout Sonoma County. In June, she debuted a piece at Paradise Ridge Winery in Santa Rosa. And on July 16, she will welcome visitors to Green Valley Farm + Mill in Sebastopol to view her newest work. 707-217-5634, [wildearthart.co](http://wildearthart.co)