

Portrait of a natural artist

Series: STEPPIN' OUT IN HERNANDO COUNTY

[STATE Edition]

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Leslie Neumann is best known in Hernando County as a founding member and spokeswoman for the Gulf Coast Conservancy. Those who know her know of her passion for preserving undeveloped land along the coast.

During October, Hernando residents will get the chance to see Neumann's other love when an exhibit of her artwork, *Infinite Grace*, will be on display in the Alfred McKethan Library at Pasco-Hernando Community College North Campus.

The opening reception will be 4:30 to 8 p.m. Thursday at the library. Visitors will be able to meet the artist, and light refreshments will be served. The exhibit runs through Oct. 24.

Neumann, 46, of Aripeka, says the *Infinite Grace* show is a chance to bring people into her world and glimpse her inspirations.

"I think people will understand much more clearly why I do what I do," Neumann said. "If you make the wilderness disappear, my entire inspiration also disappears."

Neumann said her artwork has strong ties to Aripeka and the Gulf Coast Conservancy environmental group. The artist describes her landscapes as transcendent, not depictions of actual geographical locations.

"Rather, it's an emotional and spiritual place," she said.

Working primarily with oils and hot wax, Neumann said she can apply numerous layers to her creations, creating an "enormously luminous element."

Tampa Bay-area art critics have described Neumann as "a dark romantic whose mysterious landscapes seem independent of time - or weather," and said that her "ancient civilizations whisper to us out of her clouds and mountains."

Neumann received a bachelor's degree in fine arts from the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, and her master's degree in painting from New York University. She was a professor at St. John's College in New York for six years, teaching studio art and art history.

Neumann first came to the quiet coastal village of Aripeka 12 years ago, when she married local artist Dan Stack. The couple then lived in New York City until Stack wanted to return to Aripeka in 1989. Neumann commuted between New York and Florida until making a permanent commitment to Aripeka in 1991. Shortly after, she and her husband helped spearhead the conservancy.

"The same kinds of reasons I had to make the commitment to live here was the same I had with the conservancy," Neumann said. "I took a look around and realized that this is a very special place that you just don't find very often. What we have here is so beautiful . . . and we need to hold on to that."

Infinite Grace art exhibit by Leslie Neumann: Alfred McKethan Library, Pasco-Hernando Community College North Campus, 11415 Ponce De Leon Blvd., Brooksville