

---


## Artist Statement


Ellen Campfield Nelson  
evanescence | chalkboard art

### PART 1: OBSESSION

When I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, in an attempt to be socially-accepted by my peers, I tried changing my handwriting to the style that the cooler girls seemed to prefer. You know - the one where you put a bubble dot above all the “i”s (with an optional heart or star, depending on the occasion). It was handwriting that celebrated all that was hip and sloppy and regressive and girlish. If I had retained that style of handwriting until today, this might have been my artist statement:

And then I might follow it up with an 

Or an 

Or even an 

Fortunately, after I had been rolling with this kind of thing for a little while, my father - who is left-handed, left-brained and doesn't hold with silly handwriting - couldn't take it any longer and put his foot down about

the bubble dots, the cramped style and the letter forms that would make the nuns shudder (I mention the nuns because they taught me how to write in the first place, and were sticklers about penmanship; by 4<sup>th</sup> grade the laypeople took over our education and you can see that the penmanship curriculum just went right out the window, along with weekly stories about the lives of the saints).



You might think that all this heavy-handedness about my handwriting would turn out to be terribly repressive, but it had quite the opposite effect. Instead, my dad's disdain for cool-girl-writing brought out the inner handwriting freak within me. From 4<sup>th</sup> grade on, I would write and re-write the alphabet in my spare time, trying out different fonts (although I didn't know the word “font” then - none of us did), testing out a variety of upper and lower cases, reading books for the typestyle as much as the content, jotting out A-through-Z (and a-through-z, and α through ω then sometimes numerals - Arabic and Roman) time and again. Sometimes for speed.

If anyone had really known about this obsession, I like to think that a guidance counselor, friend or teacher somewhere along the way might have urged me to consider entering a design- or art-related profession. Or at least becoming an architect, where a penchant for penmanship would have been handy. Regardless of this intervention, I think the story would have ended the same way. But the middle part would've been pretty different. As it was, I instead studied history and classics and went on to teach, become a graphic designer and then a planner. But all the while, the handwriting thing stayed with me.

And the handwriting thing is the first part of the ‘evanescence’ story. Because to me, the handwriting thing shows that when something speaks to a person deeply (even if it seems pointless and arcane and inane), you just can't get away from it. You have to acknowledge and embrace those kinds of healthy addictions, those strange-but-heartfelt interests. Because whether you think it's reasonable or not, your obsession will keep coming up and whispering in your brain. It will keep you practicing your Bs and Gs and Js until it finally finds an outlet and comes out into the daylight.

My handwriting “came out” the day Laile Fairbairn at Snow City asked me to write her menu up on a chalkboard that hung behind the drink counter. Finally there was a REASON to care about kerning and leading and typestyle: I could help people quickly and easily find the price of their latte! Neatly see the ingredients in the burrito they were thinking about ordering! Tidily offer them a spate of easy-to-read-about desserts! My handwriting had come home.

Well, one thing led to another and eventually Tish Caddell at the Bear Tooth called me up when they opened the theatre to help them out with their menus. Since then, I've been writing on chalkboards around Anchorage off-and-on for the last 9 years. And I'm not the only one. There are other folks just like me out there obsessing about handwriting and chalk and board cleaner. I'm happy for all of us that we have a venue to flaunt our passion. And I thank all those restaurants like Snow City and the Bear Tooth who understand the chalkboard is something that conveys a little bit more than the weekly specials and the espresso menu. A good chalkboard also brings artfulness and atmosphere and a tiny bit of entertainment to all who read it.

So that's half the story.

---

## PART 2: EVANESCENCE

The other part of the story has to do with the nature of chalkboard art. Chalkboard art is, to me, art-of-the-moment. You don't have to bake it, let it dry, cast it in bronze or keep it in temperature-controlled environments. It's art that smudges, that flakes away, that gets splashed, that is routinely wiped clean, that is meant to disappear. Chalkboard art isn't art you keep - it's art you will see for a month and then, when we change the specials, you'll never see again.

It's evanescent.

And in honor of its easy disappearance, I try to birth it "in-the-moment," so it enters this world the same way it leaves. I never sketch out my boards ahead of time, or work from a photo or illustration. I rarely even think about them before I step into the restaurant, and about half the time I ask a friend or customer or passing server what they'd like me to draw and then I try to draw it. I like the small challenge of seeing what I can come up with on the fly, and the pressure of trying to make something good enough to share with the whole restaurant. The result is that sometimes I draw duds, sometimes I have to erase, and sometimes people don't like it. But mostly I feel I can make something that's legible and interesting and fresh. And if I don't totally succeed, I can comfort myself with the thought that it'll be gone in a week or two anyway...

So this show is supposed to celebrate the vanishing quality of chalkboard art by demonstrating the spontaneous quality of chalkboard art creation. The night we set up the show, and the next night at the First Friday event, I'll have some blank chalkboards and be soliciting ideas from friends and strangers. I'll be as curious as I hope you are to see what emerges.

---

## A PHILOSOPHICAL POST SCRIPT: THE ARTIST INSIDE

I'm not a great artist, but I think art is great. I think ALL art is great - even the art that I don't care for, such as woven fabric wall hangings and country music. And I wholeheartedly believe that every single one of us has a creative, artistic talent that we use all the time, every day. Yet I meet people all the time, every day who say things like "I can't draw" or "I'm no good at art." To me, that is like saying "I'm no good at thinking or feeling or being alive." There are so many things in every person's life that result from a creative process - picking a paint color for your walls, signing your name on a check, having a baby, arranging your spice rack or record collection or stamps or sweaters, tapping your toes to the music, making dinner, balancing your checkbook, writing a note to your roommate, air brushing flames on your T-Bird, wrapping a gift or getting dressed in the morning. These things require you to have opinions, put things in an order that pleases you, give thought to a process, and turn a bunch of disparate ingredients into something cohesive and likable and altogether different. This is where the spirit of art lies. The rest is practice and technique and - yes, some people are closer to it if they have a good eye for composition or color or what have you. But that's not the most important bit.

If you don't believe me, I would suggest picking up a few pieces of chalk sometime. There's an empty sidewalk or chalkboard somewhere waiting for you to try your hand at this inconsequential, low-pressure, momentary, forgiving type of creative evanescence.