

JOSHUA TOBEY



## CREATIVE FREEDOM

*By Clover Neiberg*

“Right now, I have three life-sized brown bears in my studio,” reports Joshua Tobey, sounding far less perturbed than other people might be under similar circumstances. “I also have three different African table-top pieces in progress. And my job today is to push all that aside and conceptualize a new sculpture for my show in Oregon next month.”

Brown bears in the studio, multiple works in various stages of progress, new pieces to dream up, a calendar full of trips to art shows and foundries—it’s a fairly repre-

sentative slice of the life of the bronze artist, who has been creating beautiful and inventive wildlife sculpture for almost two decades now.

It’s a lifestyle Tobey knows well and chose young. A second-generation artist, he drew early inspiration from

*Above - -Hide (on all fours) & Seek (standing), bronzes, 18" high and 26" high*

*“I have sculpted a lot of bears. They are a perfect subject for anthropomorphic personalities.”*



*The Three Tenors, (Placido, Jose, & Luciano), bronzes, 33" high, 35" high and 33.5" high  
"Growing up in Tesuque New Mexico. I have always enjoyed listening to coyotes."*

his father Gene and his stepmother Rebecca, both successful bronze artists. "I had the benefit of growing up in the art world," he says. "I was born in Oregon, and my dad was a college professor at that time, teaching a ceramics course. I remember being five or six and sitting in my father's ceramics class in the corner, sculpting wildlife. He would fire them in his kiln."

He created those childhood art projects with a sense of whimsy rather than discipline. "My father always made art available to his kids, but as play, not as organized training and teaching," says Tobey, who enjoyed art but didn't seriously consider it as a future career option. "I grew up in galleries around other artists. I always knew art was something you can do as a life pursuit but, when I went to college, I intended to study business and recreation."

Once he began his academic

career, though, Tobey found himself attracted more and more to the study of art. "I'd never had a formal art class, and I wasn't a great student initially—I was a more serious fly fisherman," he says. "But art classes were what I enjoyed, and I wound up graduating [from Western State College in Gunnison, Colorado] with a BFA in three-dimensional art. And then I went home to apprentice with my father."

That apprenticeship, along with a childhood spent in close observation of the art world, instilled in Tobey a solid artistic confidence that empowered him to experiment with his medium, moving away from strict realism to a more imaginative approach. "I'm a bronze sculptor and my subject is wildlife, but my work isn't about replicating nature's perfection," he says. "I enjoy the subtle abstractions. It really is, for me, more about being inspired and





*Against All Odds, bronze, 57.5" high*

*"This is one of my favorite sculptures. This concept reminds me of all the challenges that my wife and I have faced in the art world. I always enjoy watching the small birds overcome birds of prey."*



*Wise Guy, bronze, 27" high*

*"Owls have a wonderful form for sculpture. They also have incredible capacity for facial expression. It makes them a lot of fun to sculpt."*

capturing the character, or personality, of my subject. It's about imparting a storyline."

Tobey also has experimented extensively with different patinas. At first glance, many of his pieces have the appearance of metal or stone rather than bronze. "My dad always used some color on his bronzes; I always liked that," Tobey says. "When I was developing my own professional body of work, I ended up trying to make my work different by really pushing the patina. I've worked with quite a few patineurs over the years, but in the last two years I've done the majority of my own patinas. As an artist, you're always trying to add to your own look, have your own concept. For me, as a bronze artist, finishing the work correctly means the patina needs to be as interesting as the sculpture."

Tobey finds inspiration everywhere, including his own backyard near Estes Park, Colorado, where he lives with his wife Jojo. "We've got deer and elk and bears and turkeys in the yard every day," he says. "And I go out with my friends to do photography. Other artists often use a still camera, but I prefer a video camera. I like watching the movement. I like watching the animal, trying to figure out what it's actually thinking and experiencing and conveying that to the viewer. I'm always studying wildlife. What's great about wildlife is that you find it everywhere. I was in Fort Collins downtown, and there were deer there, too. I get kind of a kick out of that—city deer."

Once he has a basic concept in mind, Tobey begins the work of creating the new piece. "There is a dialogue between the artist and the sculpture," he explains. "I think that creating a piece of art is often problem-solving. You begin by thinking of a concept. Then, as you're trying to actually make the concept, you're going to have little things that come up. It's basically a question-and-answer scenario. As I sculpt a piece, I'm constantly evaluating it, evaluating my shape and my form, what's right and what's wrong about it, answering those questions.

"The nice thing about sculpting the way I do—from memory—is that it gives me the freedom to get away from my subject's natural anatomy. I can do things with my concept and my subject that might not be real to nature, but it's perfect for composition. If you start out with the concept and work through it and answer all the questions, by the time you've finished it and you've done as good a job as you can do today, hopefully you've answered all those



*Autumn Ballad, bronze, 43" high*

*"I enjoy the challenge of sculpting wildlife. All the different anatomy makes composition exciting, while still conveying a sense of character and spirit."*



*Siesta, bronze, 33" long*

*"My Dad always felt that shape and form are the most important elements in good sculpture."*

questions correctly, and the composition is visually correct."

Tobey takes this responsibility seriously, not just for the intrinsic satisfaction of creating something beautiful, but for the community of collectors who have followed his career and continue to acquire his work. "You know, I have people who have collected my artwork for sixteen years," he says. "I love putting out a new piece to show them where it's going now. There are different paychecks as an artist. You need paychecks, because this is an expensive medium and you have to do life while you're doing art, and that takes money. But at the same time, the paycheck that comes from when someone decides to take your invention to their own space is incredible. It is. I hear about collectors giving gifts from their collection to their children and grandchildren, I hear about kids squabbling over who gets what . . . isn't that remarkable, that people grow up and live around your art?"


The business side of art, Tobey readily acknowledges, is not his

forte. "My wife Jojo, she's just awesome," he says. "I always tease that she does the smart part, and I lift and make heavy objects. When she first started helping me in my business, I was struggling to keep the bills paid and so forth and to promote my artwork. It's a full business, being an artist. You design your product, you make it, you ship it, you go and represent it. Before she came along, I was a one-man circus. She has a background in graphic design, and she's an entrepreneur as well. We have a ball. We don't have children, and our business has been our child in many ways. We travel 90 days a year, and we enjoy the travel and the people we meet."

If he did have children, would Tobey encourage them to grow up to be artists, as his own father and stepmother encouraged him? "I'd absolutely tell them to go for it," he says. "I'd tell them to enjoy it. As a second-generation sculptor, I have great respect for the struggle. This is a life's pursuit and a life's discipline, and there are going to be a lot of roadblocks and a lot of things

in the way and a lot of challenges. I have an awesome wife, and she and I have enjoyed sleeping in the truck in the parking lot. We've enjoyed all the struggles and all of the attempts to become successful enough to make this all that we do. The people I appreciate in the art world are the ones who have had those struggles.

"It's a responsibility and an honor to get to be an artist, or write, or work in the arts to make your living. Making it your life's discipline—that's the reward. I would tell them to absolutely go for it and to enjoy the entire thing. But you have to be tenacious. Tenacious means that, when you find the challenges, when you encounter the people who don't understand what you're doing, you need to laugh it off, and you have to keep trying every day."

On that note, Tobey wraps up the conversation. He's a busy man with a studio full of bears and unfinished projects, and a show to prepare for. He's ready to stop talking and return to the important business of making art. 

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