

OPEN PORTFOLIO JOSHUA TOBEY



When people see Joshua Tobey's bronze wildlife sculptures for the first time, they often notice the expression on the animals' faces before they even notice the species of animal. That's because Joshua, who lives in Colorado, says it's easier for him to convey human emotions through wildlife than through figurative sculptures. As the son and apprentice of the late sculptor Gene Tobey, Joshua knows his way around an art studio. His first wildlife sculpture was a bear that he quickly realized was more of a self-portrait than a literal depiction. Today, he describes himself as an impressionistic wildlife sculptor. Joshua checked in with us from Jackson, Wyo., and the Jackson Hole Fall Arts Festival. At next year's festival, he will be one of two featured artists, an accolade that brings him great pride. Joshua has exhibited at Rowe Fine Art Gallery (336 SR 179 at Tlaquepaque Arts & Crafts Village; 928-282-8877) since March. He will be at the gallery for a special show this spring. To see more of his work, visit www.rowegallery.com.



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JOSHUA: "I was born in Corvallis, Oregon. At that time, my dad, Gene Tobey, was a ceramics professor at a small university. After

he and my mom divorced, he was very determined to be a full-time professional artist. We moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico. He eventually married my stepmom, Rebecca. When he was in Oregon, he was a production potter, but he really wanted to be a sculptor. He started to sculpt out of ceramics using slip castings. My stepmother teamed up with him, and those guys had a wonderful southwestern art career for many years. He passed away in 2006 from leukemia. My stepmother carries on today.

"So I grew up in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the '80s and '90s, and there was a remarkably great art market at that time. My dad was friends with a lot of today's top Western artists. I grew up around those guys. When I went to college, I selected Western State [Colorado University] in Gunnison, Colorado. My dad was able to trade his art for my education. I like telling people that I had a presidential scholarship. I was never a remarkable student, but the fly-fishing was tremendous, and I knew if I was someplace with good fly-fishing, I could stick out school. I went there to study business and recreation. I was guiding fly-fishing and teaching children skiing. My concept was that I might own a fly shop or do resort management. Even though I had grown up in my dad's studio, I didn't consider art as a career. I was never interested in doing what dad did. Fortunately, I had to take core courses, and the classes that I enjoyed were the art classes. They were the first art classes I had ever taken.

"I came into art really honestly. The classes were fun, and I knew I could do it. My dad sent five kids to college, and I wasn't going to leave him hanging. I knew I needed to get a degree. By the time I graduated, my dad's lung disease, which he got from his art, had progressed enough that we were all concerned with how long he would be around. I decided to go home and study with him. That was the best decision I ever made. I felt like I was mature enough at that time to do it. That was in 2000, and I was 22. I graduated from college with a B.F.A. in three-dimensional art.

"I moved in with my dad, who was living in Texas hill country by that time. He had a big ranch. It was one of the hardest jobs I ever had. Later on, he decided he wanted to fish more, and he moved to the Texas Gulf Coast. Real estate has always been a passion of mine, and I followed him down there. I was there for almost 10 years. It was a wonderful place, and I miss the ocean terribly. I





moved to Loveland, Colorado in 2011. I moved here for the foundries. I needed more help. I was producing a lot – I love to work. I have to relearn how to play these days. But I moved to Colorado so I would be more central to my art markets like Santa Fe and Jackson. The art foundries in Loveland offer a tremendous amount of support.

“I began sculpting professionally immediately out of college. It was a struggle at that time. One of my favorite stories from that time is working on a horse sculpture for weeks. I was living in a house behind my dad’s house. I’d spend all day in his studio, and at night I would work on my own body of work. One night after dinner my dad said he was going to go back to work and start on a horse he had in mind. I told him I was working on a horse, and he told me to bring it over. I show up the next day with this horse that I’d been laboring on for a couple of weeks. And there was a horse standing in my dad’s studio, from scratch, and it’s beautiful. You grow and learn to get better and sculpt faster. It became more innate, and I started to trust my ability. At that time, right out of college, I only had a half-dozen pieces. Being an artist is a school of hard knocks. You’ve got something that you’re passionate about, you load it up in the truck and go try to promote yourself, and it can be brutal. I never let my dad get me into a gallery, so to speak. I wanted to earn that myself. The only way I got into the galleries was by telling them that I only had six pieces, and I wouldn’t take up much space [laughs]. These days, it’s a different story. I have over 60 pieces in my body of work.

“I got to work with my dad for five years, and it was great. I did mostly enlarging and minimizing sculptures for him. We never collaborated on anything together. I know it was a regret of his, but I was still trying to discover myself. He was a great dad, and he allowed me to do what I was doing without interrupting or giving me too much feedback. He was very proud of me, but I always wanted my work to be different. That’s why I’ve pushed hard with my patina. My dad’s ceramics were very colorful, and when he started doing bronzes, he started using contemporary – or hot – patinas, which are colorful. It’s something I’ve always liked and admired. That’s how I pushed the envelope and opened the door to where I am today.

“My first two professional pieces came out of my senior [year] body of work. When I was in college, my professors weren’t sure what to make of me. We didn’t really utilize the foundry at college, but I wanted to be a bronze sculptor, so I was using professional



foundries when I was in college. I was a fly-fishing guide all summer, so I would save up and produce a couple of pieces. When I got out of college, those pieces led into my professional body of work. A lot were human anatomy. Then one day I sculpted an elk, and then there was a bear that I eventually decided was a self-portrait. He was called *The Timid Bear*. I realized that with the wildlife, I was telling the human story. I was telling my story. With the wildlife, I could exhibit anthropomorphic qualities. *The Timid Bear* looks very afraid, but why would he be afraid? He has everything he needs to succeed. Those few pieces taught me a lot. Something that I do well is watch what I've been working on and study what works and what does not. My body of work teaches me — one piece leads to another. That's why I've done series. You get started on a sculpture and before you are finished, your brain has gone on to a new piece or idea. So the wildlife came out of sculpting the human figure, which was a fairly easy thing for me to do. The wildlife was more challenging, but it was easier for me to impart human emotions on the wildlife than the human figure.

"I've sculpted the bear many times, and I have a lot of bear ideas. I've sculpted elk, moose, bighorn sheep, antelope, sea lions, pelicans, caribou, deer, foxes, coyotes — the whole gamut. When I was on the coast, I was sculpting bears and moose. When I moved to Colorado, I sculpted pelicans and fish. I consider myself a wildlife artist, but I'm an impressionist. I do 95 percent of my work from memory. I often even stylize and change shapes when I know something isn't correct in nature but it's correct in sculpture. The only time I really study subject matter is if I'm having a problem. You know what the animal is, but the feeling it gives you is the other part.

"I really enjoy being out in the field. I was around a lot of bears when I fished, and I'm in Jackson [Wyoming] right now, so I'll go out to Grand Teton National Park. Whenever I have a chance to get out and study wildlife, I do it. I spend my time looking through binoculars and a camera lens. I reference that, but I make sure I put it away when I get to the studio. If I put the photo in front of me, it will take over the process, and I will start sculpting the photograph.

"One of my favorite things to do is to go to the shows and do installations. I love seeing people interact with the artwork because they do, and I think that's different from a lot of other artists. When people sit down with your bear and laugh and pretend they are one of the bears, it's inspiring. It makes me want to go back to work. You wind up studying your





audience. I study my audience as much as the wildlife, and that's a lot of fun. My dad always said a sculptor's greatest compliment is when someone has the desire to explore a sculpture with their hands. I find that to be true. It's wonderful to see somebody explore and discover your sculpture. I like to tease my painter friends: You can't handle a painting. The neat thing about the sculpture is that you can climb into its lap and put your arms around its neck.

"A lot of folks think I do all of my own patina work, but that's not true. What I have done, though, is design all of my own patinas, whether I'm doing the execution or not. I'm personally doing about 80 percent of the patina work, and that's a lot. It's like having a second job. I'm working on this bighorn sheep, and I literally lost two nights of sleep just worrying about the piece. I would get up in the middle of the night and write down the steps to execute this patina. The patina is the second half of the creative process. I want the color to be rich, and I want it to say something about the subject. It doesn't have to be true to life, but it's like getting up in the morning and putting on the wrong color belt and shoes – it's something you can't do. It has to be right. Sometimes I have a patina in mind before I sculpt a piece – it's funny what happens first. Sometimes the title comes first, other times the sculpture comes first. Honestly, there have been a couple of pieces where they haven't come together at all.

"When I get back to my studio, I have a life-size horse to work on. There's a life-size coyote in there. Right now, it's called *The Symphony*, but the title might change. There's a new mule deer piece. I have several eagles that I'm doing and a red tail hawk. It's going to be a busy year because of the Jackson Hole Fall Arts Festival. It's been going on for 30 years, and [the organizers] have always selected a single artist to be the poster child for the festival. It's never been a sculptor until now. They selected me and Nancy Dunlop Cawdrey, a painter, as the featured artists for 2014. It's an opportunity. I typically produce about 15 sculptures a year, and that's a pretty good number. This year is going to be no exception. I will produce 15 sculptures for next fall. One will be the arts festival piece that will be a limited edition and only for sale through the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce.

"I love it when people interact with my artwork. There are two main components to being a professional artist. There's the art and then there's the collector. Neither one exists without the other. I would like my work to be remembered for the thrill of me as a sculptor discovering it and an admirer discovering it as well." •