BY ROSE FREDRICK

FROM THE BONES

For wildlife sculptors, fluency in animal physiology is a must. It doesn't matter how realistic or stylized the artist's ultimate interpretation; if the measurements are off and the bones not set right, the sculptor will struggle with composition and design, which will ultimately impinge on the ability to achieve true artistic expression.

In other words, wildlife sculptors have to know the rules before they break them. For this reason, many artists have extensive hands-on experience working with the animals they portray. That experience comes from a variety of sources as well as a rather unconventional route: taxidermy.

Taxidermy is to sculpture what illustration is to fine art: intensive training and discipline coupled with impossible deadlines that finely hone the mechanics of craft into muscle memory. And though the lessons learned from preparing an animal's skin and mounting it on an anatomically correct model may sound purely academic, the foundation artists derive from taxidermy has proven to be a most unique springboard into self-expression.

DAN OSTERMILLER with his *Scottish Angus Cow and Calf*, 2001, bronze (unique), 28 x 11 ft. (overall)

DAN OSTERMILLER (b. 1956), *The Prophet*, 2019, bronze (edition of 15), 75 x 8 x 21 in.; photo: Marcia Ward (The Image Maker, Denver)

Paul Rhymer (b. 1962), *I Squawk the Line: The Bird Dressed in Black*, 2023, bronze on stone (unique), 40 x 26 x 12 in.

INTRODUCTIONS

Like many wildlife artists who earned their chops in taxidermy, Colorado's Dan Ostermiller (b. 1956) was introduced to the trade through family. "My father was a world-famous taxidermist," he says. "He had operations in Africa, India, Alaska, and Canada. I grew up around taxidermy, and it took me all over the world."

Those formative years Ostermiller spent working for his father, a Russian-German immigrant who started his business in Berthoud, Colorado, in the 1930s, were demanding, to say the least. "When I was in it with my dad," he recalls, "it was a real production. The mannequins had the general anatomy minus nose, eyes, and ears. I did three animals a day; that's six eyes and ears, three noses. I got really fast and developed tremendous eye-hand coordination."

The father of Maryland sculptor Paul Rhymer (b. 1962) was also a taxidermist and taught him the trade. But Canadian-born artist Tim Cherry (b. 1965) gravitated to taxidermy because it went hand-in-hand with guiding, which he did in the Yukon in the summer and autumn. "Taxidermy was the perfect life for a young guy who loved being outside hunting and fishing," Cherry says. "It was idyllic."

The afternoon that Colorado artist Gerald Balciar (b. 1942) graduated high school in rural Wisconsin, he walked across the river to the taxidermy shop and started working full-time. The man Balciar worked for was unusual in that he still used the animals' bones. "It was the old-fashioned way of doing it," Balciar recalls. "Having all the legs and skull to work with, that was good training for me."

Paul Rhymer mounts a Gorilla ("Bom Bom") for the Sam Noble Museum, Oklahoma's Museum of Natural History (Norman), 2012

(INSET PHOTO) Tim Cherry positioning the skeleton of a black buck antelope to create a taxidermy form, 1984 ■ Tim Cherry (right) and Forest Hart sculpting the musculature of a black buck antelope for a taxidermy form, 1984

TIM CHERRY (b. 1965), *Snake in the Grass*, 2007, high-polished stainless steel (edition of 8), 6 x 42 x 6 in., photo: Mel Schockner

GERALD BALCIAR (b. 1942), *Shade Tree*, 2021, bronze (edition of 100), 21 x 7 x 6 in.

Montana sculptor Tim Shinabarger (b. 1966) knew by the age of 10 that he wanted to learn taxidermy. He surmised that taxidermy was the clearest path to living the life he dreamed of, that is, the life of an explorer artist like Carl Akeley, Robert Rockwell, James L. Clark, Louis Paul Jonas, and William R. Leigh. "I knew from an early age that that was the life I wanted," Shinabarger says. "I'm an explorer at heart."

HOW TAXIDERMY BECAME AN ART

There's a famous photograph taken of Carl Akeley (1864–1926) in East Africa, in what is now Somalia. He stands before a tent, one hand bandaged, the other arm in a sling. His brow furrowed, hair tousled, he looks darkly at a leopard dangling next to him from its hind legs. Not long before, the leopard had sprung from the tall grass and leapt upon Akeley, who fought it off, with his bare hands, to the death. Not the typical resume of an artist, to say the least.

Beyond the wild, often brutal, adventures, Akeley's contributions to our knowledge of wildlife live on in natural history museums across the country. Widely considered the father of modern taxidermy, Akeley developed lightweight hollow body mannequins that he then sculpted with accurate musculature in action poses. His taxidermied animals were placed in dioramas filled with plant materials indigenous to the animal's homeland and set against a backdrop painted on a curved wall, which gave the tableau the illusion of distance and space.

"In the old days," says Cherry, "you went out on safari for whatever the museum needed in their collection. It was romantic: you bring animal skins back, someone sculpts the mannequin and mounts them, then the painters come in. By the time I was going to museums, that way of collecting animals was phasing out. I don't know of any museums that have taxidermy staff anymore."

Indeed, when Rhymer, who worked for the Smithsonian Institution as a taxidermist, retired in 2010 to sculpt full-time, his position wasn't filled. Yet he doesn't see it as the end: "There's still a fascination with taxidermy," he says. "But most museums contract out for services when needed." Gone are the days of massive hunting expeditions. Now when museums need a replacement specimen, they call around to zoos to see if there are any animals who died recently that they can immortalize.

MAKING THE LEAP

It's interesting to consider the ways one heeds the call to become an artist, which often means turning away from a stable income. For Balciar, it came after working for 11 years with Jonas Brothers Furs in Denver, the company he went to after leaving that first taxidermy shop in Wisconsin. It was at Jonas Brothers that he met Ken Bunn (1935–2020). "He was the first animal sculptor I knew," Balciar notes. "I remember the first year I worked there, 1962, Ken Bunn was there and already doing wax for museums. I followed his career, and it seemed like his career was a lot more fun than what I was doing."

After decades of taxidermy, Shinabarger, who undoubtedly used some of Bunn's sculpted mounts for his work, came to the same conclusion. But it wasn't until he actually worked with clay that he made the leap; the moment his hands worked clay into his first sculpture, he knew it was time to move on. "The main thing I got out of taxidermy was learning anatomy," he recalls. "How to measure an animal and take that information and create sculptures."

But fine art is a big leap from taxidermy. To help shift his mindset, Shinabarger reached out to the community of artists and found sculptor Hollis Williford (1940–2007) in Loveland, Colorado. Williford introduced him to books written by artists Robert Fawcett and John F. Carlson. Soon he was immersed in a new way of thinking and seeing. "Hollis taught me that an artist has to have something to say, that every work of art should have a reason for being."

On Cherry's 19th birthday, he flew to Boston to meet renowned taxidermist and mannequin sculptor Forest Hart. Cherry wanted to learn from the noted mammal taxidermist, but something much better happened: Hart picked Cherry up from the airport saying he was on his way to a New York foundry to cast his first bronze, and would Cherry mind coming along? "Walking through the foundry, that's when I fell in

TIM SHINABARGER (b. 1966), *The Mountaineers*, 2012, bronze (edition of 20), 48 x 23 x 10 in.

Tim Shinabarger riding in Wyoming's Washakie Wilderness

love with sculpture," Cherry remembers. "After the foundry, we went to museums and art galleries in New York and to the Salmagundi Club. It was the trip that started my whole career."

"My first thought of what sculpture was," Ostermiller says, "ties back to Louis Paul Jonas, who worked with a friend of my father. Louis developed these small animal sculptures but also did the life-size bronze called *The Grizzly's Last Stand* that my father took me to see many times in the Denver Art Museum. That was so impressive. Seeing that and his miniaturized taxidermy made me think about and start to understand sculpture. I never thought of myself as a sculptor until I saw those small pieces by Louis." Ostermiller was 18 when he no longer saw any creativity in taxidermy and broke from it. He too sought out a community of sculptors and discovered the foundry in Loveland. By 1977 he was casting sculpture and hasn't looked back since.

BREAKING AWAY

"My first pieces were very detailed," Cherry explains. "But I fell in love with art nouveau, and I started sculpting stone." He worked with Fritz White, who encouraged the use of simple shapes and the look of polished stone, which Cherry then transferred into his bronze work. "Taxidermy is a tool in the toolbox," he says. "You always go back to your roots and your knowledge. My challenge is that I want to stylize my animals and designs, but I have to make sure the animal is what it is, no matter how far I stretch and go in an abstract direction."

"I used to be very realistic," says Balciar. "I can remember putting eyelashes on an antelope. But I knew that wasn't the way to go. I realized, 'I'm just making a model, a representation.' It was like doing a photograph instead of a painting." So he started leaving out the nonessentials, and, though it took him years to develop his iconic style, Balciar says he's still evolving: "If you give me another 150 or 200 years, I will have evolved into doing abstract."

At the end of Carl Akeley's life, he had a serious change of heart. After many expeditions and killing hundreds of animals, which he used to create dioramas meant to instill a sense of wonder and the desire to, ironically, save the kinds of animals he had killed, Akeley advocated for wildlife preserves where animals could be safe from hunters and poachers.

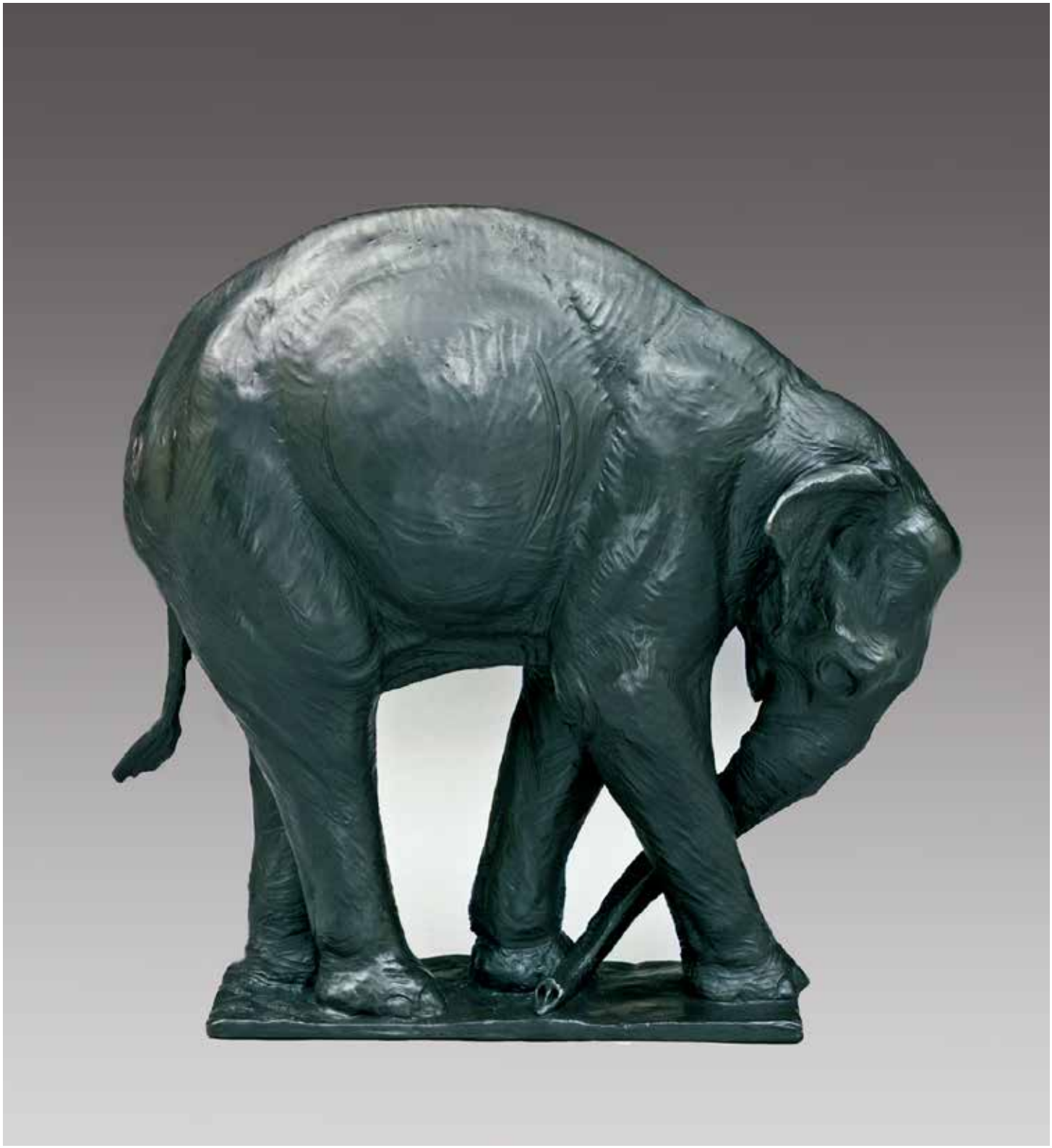
As for today's sculptors who started out in taxidermy, there is also a deep reverence for nature and an understanding of life realized through death. "I hunted quite a bit when I was young," Ostermiller says. "That's how I met Tim Cherry, hunting grizzlies in the Yukon territory in the late '80s. But I got tired of killing. I understand the conservation aspect of hunting. For me personally, I don't have any interest in killing another animal."

So, what is the best training for a young would-be wildlife sculptor? "Go to the zoo," says Balciar. "Read books and study animals." Balciar doesn't sculpt animals he hasn't had a personal experience with. Once he decides on his next subject, he orders numerous books to learn all he can. "If you want to put your hands on the bones of an animal, call a taxidermist. But do your own research because that's when you're going to learn the most."

"Taxidermy," Shinabarger observes, "is just an animal standing there; it doesn't really say anything. As sculptors, we bring an aesthetic."

Perhaps the best advice is the guiding principle that Ken Bunn followed: "In my mind, a great piece of art lets the viewer know something was churning inside the artist, that he was really 'turned on' by the creative process." ●

ROSE FREDRICK is a curator, writer, and publisher who works with artists to help tell their stories and create a better understanding of the artistic process. Through her blog, *The Incurable Optimist*, she interviews artists in search of the elements that lead to pure artistry.



Dan Ostermiller's *Lost But Not Forgotten*

Gerald Balciar's *Urban Red*

Tim Shinabarger's *Woodland Bull*

Paul Rhymer's *Couldn't Stand Another Hour of Daylight*

Tim Cherry's *Dreams of Salmon*