

# CONFLUENCE

## In This Environmental Age, More Sculptors Are Taking On Wildlife To Make A Green Statement

by Todd Wilkinson

Suppose for a moment we knew that all life on planet Earth was going to end tomorrow at dusk—and that the terminal collapse of species, including our own, was hastened not by an approaching asteroid but the result of destructive human activities. Would we change our behavior if given a chance or ride off carelessly into the sunset?

Now ask yourself this: Were a sculptor commissioned to create a monument that called attention to the urgent need for a course correction, how might the narrative be constructed? What message would be encoded symbolically and communicated in a visual language that would be universally understood?

Fortunately, the end of civilization is not immediately upon us, though experts say worrisome harbingers demand transgenerational thinking.

Famed Harvard zoologist Edward O. Wilson warns that Earth is entering the sixth major species extinction episode, the only one in the history of our planet caused by the activities of a single animal—*Homo sapiens*. Recently, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) said that half of all wildlife populations known to exist forty years ago already have disappeared. On top of this, climate


change is happening at a rate faster than at any time in the past million years, whether one attributes it to the burning of fossil fuels, where the preponderance of scientific evidence resides, or to sunspots. Today, seven billion of us cover the globe, and by the middle of this century there could be ten or eleven billion, stressing ocean fish populations already seriously depleted, fresh water supplies being over-spent, rising levels of instability in the world, and increasing conflict between nations that possess nuclear weapons.

I haven't lost sight that this is a fine art magazine published by a venerable 112-year-old institution striving to be relevant. Rest assured, this is not the kind of story that would have appeared in your grandfather's edition of *Sculpture Review* but then again, our elders did not dwell in what has been called the "environmental age."

This issue is dedicated to a provocative discussion of how the conservation movement frames the way that we as a culture see animals, how that shapes the images that sculptors make and, in turn, how sculptors shape the conservation movement.



Photos: Courtesy of the artist.



The plight of wildlife is not only a symbol of our times. It is a reflection of our values as a society.

—Kent Ullberg

Nature, after all, is more than a mere muse. She is our life support system, the source of who we are and are a part of, and, in the lack of careful stewardship, our undoing. Ever increasingly—and by generations young and old—sculptors are making art arguably pregnant with ecological motifs. They're being created in response to these times and as a way of bearing witness, but also, poignantly, many are attempting overtly to help elevate conscious awareness. Some have found commercial success along the way, while others, paying no heed to whether patrons will approve or purchase, are motivated by the sole intention of sparking a public discussion. Never before has the intersection of art and nature conservation assumed a higher profile in society, and for many artists their statements take the forms of animals.

In a recent story in *The New Yorker* magazine (January 26, 2015), resident art critic Peter Schjeldahl observed: "All artists want to change the world, usually just by making it take special notice of them, but now and then they do so out of a devotion to larger hopes." Schjeldahl wasn't referencing environmental art but rather the broader impulse among artists to do more than creative stimulating things; he was alluding to the visual tactile touchstones that become catalysts for doing good in the world. This is a question that I believe should at least be pondered by all National Sculpture Society members, young or old.

*Opposite and on this page: Interdependency by Kent Ullberg (2014), bronze, 33 inches high.*

Kent Ullberg (b. 1945) admits that his motivations aren't entirely egoless, but the Swedish-American sculptor, renowned for having 100 wildlife monuments in public spaces on four continents, says his hopes reside not in the reputations of prominent venues that display his work but the kind of world his grandkids will be inheriting when he's gone.

Long ago, Ullberg says, he stopped worrying about whether his pieces simply "looked good," weathered well, or blended in seamlessly as objects of landscape architecture—essentially as hood ornaments accenting buildings. His epic conceptual paean to sailfish and the marine environment straddles a full city block in front of the Broward County Convention Center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

He has a massive whooping crane monument at the National Wildlife Federation's headquarters in Washington, D.C., and a recently installed portrayal of a long-extinct mastodon (to catalyze a conversation about climate change) in front of the Denver Science Museum. But his master project is the installation called *The Spirit of Nebraska's Wilderness*, completed in 2009, which plays out across a huge span of downtown Omaha. Ullberg's part in the three-artist collaboration with Blair Buswell and Ed Fraughton involves a domino effect of actions in which nine bison are portrayed stampeding through the urban core—literally passing through buildings—until they flush a flock of fifty-eight Canada geese into flight. The piece is intended not as a decorative muse for Omaha residents to ponder their city as a historic gateway to the West, but to communicate the importance of wild nature. To some, they are also a ghostly reminder that only a century and a half ago there were tens of millions of bison in the American West, some of the largest concentrations of which roamed in Nebraska. The near-annihilation of bison by market hunters and by settlers clearing the prairie to make way for cattle, and to subdue Native Americans, is unmatched in terms of a deliberate attempt to exterminate a species. Ullberg isn't passing judgment. He's calling attention to what's been lost and, in so doing, planting the seed for society to re-explore possibilities for redemption.

"Being given a public space to display your work is a privilege. It's like having a giant canvas. But you better make the most of it. You better say something that has an effect on people. I don't want my works to just be landmarks," Ullberg says. "I want them to be daily reminders of what nature represents in our lives. Anything less and you are wasting their time and squandering an opportunity. What's the point of that?"

Trying to connect the dots of what's at stake, Ullberg recently completed a 10-foot long work, *Interdependency*, which in

silhouette appears to be a leaping, gleaming tarpon. But look closer and you discover the fish's body is actually comprised of dozens of smaller depictions of other species—creatures that are part of the tarpon's interconnected web of life. *Interdependency* is featured in a showing of seventy-five multimedia works titled "Environmental Impact" that is making a stop at Brookgreen Gardens in 2015.

As an art and environmental writer since the mid-1980s, my conversations with Ullberg go back a quarter century, and include a book I wrote about him, *Monuments to Nature*. It's what Ullberg told me half my own life ago that has proved to possess remarkable prescience.

Rising environmental awareness, coupled with mass communication, has brought more appreciation for animal imagery (paradoxically strengthened by the increasing rareness of many species), and their iconographic presence in art has never been higher. "People respond to what they love, what they can recognize, and the form of an animal needs no interpreter," Ullberg says, pointing to the resonant iconography that animals command in modernity, from being mascots of sports teams, emblems for multibillion dollar brands, and sobering reminders that extinction lasts forever. "The plight of wildlife is not only a symbol of our times," he adds. "It is a reflection of our values as a society." The Paleolithic animal images in the caves of Lascaux and Altamira are wildlife art that communicated the elemental knowledge of survival, spiritual reverence, and harmonious relationships. Throughout the ages, animals took on allegorical significance sometimes attached to religion and mythology. In Europe, as the reach of Christianity expanded, a divide between wild nature and tamed civilization opened. Only with the dawn of ecological enlightenment in the latter half of the nineteenth century, first flickering with Charles Darwin's positing of the theory of evolution and reflected with the golden Romantic age of *les animaliers* in France, did the shift toward re-embracing wildlife begin in art.

Out on the rolling plains of the American West, meanwhile, where the conceit of Manifest Destiny had resulted in the near-extinction of an estimated thirty-five million bison (once the most populous wild ungulate on Earth), and with elk, pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, deer, moose, beaver, foxes, mountain lions, wolves, and grizzly bears, as well as billions of birds, including four billion passenger pigeons, over-hunted or erased from most of their historic homelands, did the consumption of wildlife pause in contemplation. Faced with these catastrophes, art demonstrated its might as a rallying tool for conservation.

The nature paintings of Thomas Moran (1837–1926) helped convince Congress in 1872 to establish Yellowstone as the first national park in the world. Bronze interpretations of bison, grizzly bears, wolves, and other frontier megafauna and apex predators being rapidly depleted helped arouse public attention. Romantic nineteenth-century works by the likes of Charles M. Russell, Edward Kemeys, Henry Merwin Shrady, and Alexander Phimister Proctor elevated their profile and helped to halt and prevent their complete eradication. But today's conundrums are far more complicated and it's not all doom and gloom for endangered species, their habitats, and all environmental issues.

Wildlife art has highlighted the promising things that are happening. Europe today is undergoing its own version of rewilding, with bears and wolves expanding in number, mirroring what is happening in the Northern Rockies of the United States. Sadly, however, the recent delisting of wolves from federal Endangered Species Act protection (transferring their status to individual state responsibility) and their ongoing



*On this page, left: Isis by Simon Gudgeon (2009), bronze, 40-1/2 inches high; right: Barn Owl by Simon Gudgeon (2009), bronze, 30 inches high.*

slaughter in states like Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming is a horrific measure of how far we still need to go—despite the ongoing efforts of millions of people and dozens of conservation organizations. Likewise, the war on the last genetically wild bison in the U.S. continues in Yellowstone National Park; and grizzlies and wolverines (the latter near the brink of extinction) are also endangered in the lower 48.

British sculptor Simon Gudgeon (b.1958) is a former solicitor who began painting in his thirties and started working as a sculptor in three dimensions at the age of forty. In recent years he has gained acclaim for the monumental sculpture of an ibis called *Isis*, named after the Egyptian goddess of nature and motherhood, in London's Hyde Park (2009) and also installed in 2012 at the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and for the project of a lifetime that he and his wife, Monique, have taken on, called "Sculpture by the Lakes."

Simon and Monique moved to Dorset in Great Britain and purchased twenty-six acres of land at Pallington Lakes to gain space for Simon to work. They decided to "re-landscape" the environs and develop them into a sculpture park. Gudgeon's wildlife sculpture not only brings an elegant mystical mood to the wetlands, meadows, and forest groves that are protected as magnets for real wildlife, but it has caused him and his wife to reflect more deeply about the aesthetic of wild nature and why it matters. "Sculpture by the Lakes" is fast becoming an ecotourism attraction, especially popular among naturalists and bird watchers, and it has set off a lively discussion about how the intersection of art and nature can change perception.

Conservation should be a galvanizing subject for everyone on the planet, Gudgeon says, having just returned from a research-gathering trip to eastern Africa. People can insulate themselves, but they can't run away from reality.

All around the world, the survival of large charismatic species is threatened. Polar bears are in trouble, as are most major large animals in Africa and India, as well as in our oceans. Many animals—such as rhinos, elephants, lions, tigers, pangolins, bears, sharks, whales, and dolphins—are threatened by black market poachers, as well as the Asian appetite for eating imperiled species, and using them as alleged folk medicines. Often, it boils down simply to the refusal of humans to share space with other creatures or inconvenience themselves by altering their behavior. Out of sight means out of mind.

Consider Westminster, Maryland, sculptor Bart Walter's *Climate Change* (2010), the dramatic pose of a polar bear stranded on an icecap that falls away beneath its feet. "This sculpture is intended to initiate thought and create dialog," says Walter (b.1958). "Is the ice in the sculpture melting or frozen hard?

Is the polar bear questing for suitable habitat while stranded, or is he simply testing the wind for [the] scent of seals from atop a convenient perch? I leave it to the viewer to decide how to interpret this sculpture. My hope is that people who view the sculpture will also consider how to interpret the flood of scientific data coming in concerning climate change, and what the outcome of the larger picture may be."

Walter has achieved acclaim for provocatively exploring the timeless power of the human figure by making chimpanzees and gorillas the subject of his portrayals. A major influence has been his friendship with the legendary primate researcher and ethologist Dr. Jane Goodall. Concerned about the plight of primates and sobering reports that gorillas, chimpanzees,



*On this page:* *Climate Change* by Bart Walter (2010), bronze, 15-1/2 inches high. *Opposite page, top:* *Embrace* by Sayaka Ganz (2014), reclaimed plastic objects, aluminum, wire, hardware, a permanent installation in the lobby of the Exploration Tower in Port Canaveral, Florida; *bottom:* *The Patriarch* by Bart Walter (2001), bronze, 8-3/4 inches high.



“... I was taught in kindergarten that objects that are discarded before their time weep at night inside the trash bin”.

—Sayaka Ganz

and orangutans could soon go extinct in the wild, Walter’s classic figurative works invite us to ponder our own fate by staring into the faces of close biological relatives. Should the viewer interpret it as an elegy or eulogy.

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## RAMBADT SETS HIS BIRDS FREE TO BRING WILDLIFE ART TO UNLIKELY PLACES

Don Rambadt (b. 1970) says that art that stokes us into higher conscious awareness about nature can be the start, for some people, of having a profound epiphany. He's seen it happen.

Rambadt, a sculptor and naturalist from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is drawn to pieces of overlooked landscape that lie between wilderness and the concrete jungles of cities. "When I was in school, I spent a lot of time down near Milwaukee harbor on Lake Michigan. It's a busy port and scattered around the man-made grounds are storage elevators and trains and a wetland that was initially carved out to be a place for dumping the mucky material being dredged," he says.

The artificial containment pond turned into an amazing area for bird watching—herons and cranes, migratory ducks and geese, and their corresponding predators like harriers, peregrine falcons, and snowy owls. They were the origins of several of his sculptures.

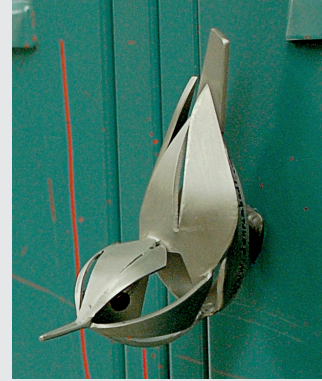
"Birds connect us to the wider world," he says. "It might be a warbler that winters in Central America and then shows up in the middle of your town. I get excited when all of these passerines and songbirds show up out of nowhere and it happens across America. You don't have to head out to Yellowstone to have a great wildlife watching experience. Birds grace your day, anytime, anywhere."

Rambadt wanted to defy the stationary limitations of sculpture. Quite whimsically, he released the idea of *Magnetic Migration* to the skies in 2008, not knowing where it would land. Rambadt made a series of small sculptures of nuthatches so small they can be carried in the palm of a human hand, and attached magnets to the backs, enabling them to stick to any metal surface. Then he handed them out to peripatetic friends.

Photo confirmation of their around-the-world voyages has come from as far away as Japan and Israel, on bridges, skyscrapers, public transport, urban environs, and wilder haunts.

"I wanted people to be challenged by finding the birds both in context and out of context because it is those kinds of encounters, where you play on people's curious impulses, that bring rewards," he says. "To have them contemplate this unexpected discovery that happens for only a few minutes in your otherwise busy distracted day. If you wonder what it is, maybe you'll touch it and if you make contact then maybe you'll start asking more questions."

This, he says, is how ripple effects begin.



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Contrast Walter's style and philosophy with that of Fort Wayne, Indiana, sculptor Sayaka Ganz. "I mostly make animal forms and present them abstractly," she says. In her work, she boldly transforms the issue of resource depletion—particularly the conversion of oil into disposable plastics—into convention-challenging collectible art. Ganz's animals are not only tactile and dynamically designed and composed; they're set in motion.

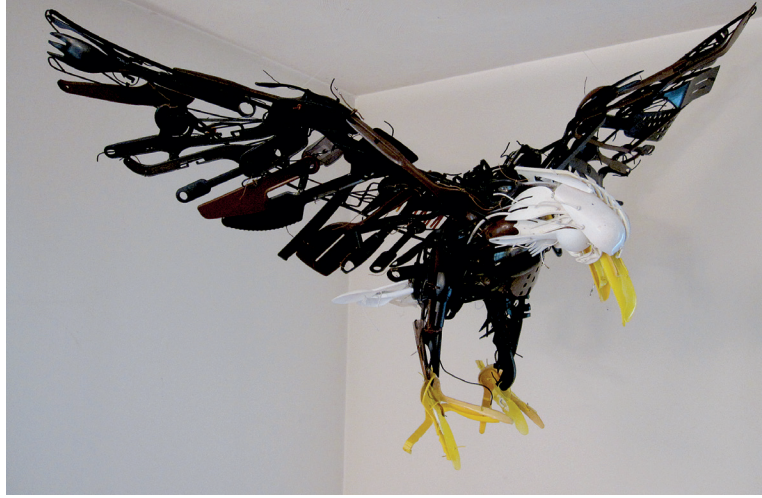
Born in Japan but raised around the world, including a few years spent in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Ganz has attracted attention for the way she approaches found throwaway materials and innovatively repurposes them as wildlife. "Japanese Shinto philosophy teaches that all objects and organisms have spirits, and I was taught in kindergarten that objects that are discarded before their time weep at night inside the trash bin," she says. "This became a vivid image in my mind. The constant need to adjust to a new environment also gave me a strong desire to fit in and to create harmony around me."

Postconsumer plastics, her medium of choice, are so colorful and light and lend themselves to be suspended from ceilings, she says. "They are also so underappreciated right now as materials in sculpture or painting. Our societal values are so skewed to assessing the worth of things only monetarily. I want to show a different kind of value." And better an object that invites wonder than ending up in a landfill or floating in the ocean.

Her work is edifying, but she has no interest in standing on a soapbox and moralizing. "I went through a phase when I was younger. I wanted the viewer to see my work and be thinking about the environmental consequences and lost recycling possibilities of these materials being thrown away," she says. "But I've come to believe that by focusing on negative things, by coming across as preachy and laying guilt upon viewers they become paralyzed and turned off."

Her philosophy comes down to leading by example and being the change she wants to see. "I believe it is very difficult to think far into the future in terms of our ecological footprint. So often our predictions are wrong, and there are no guarantees for anyone's future. I do not want to condemn the use of plastic or our desire for a more convenient, easier life. However, we must be aware that convenience has hidden costs. And each of us has choices."

Ganz wants her sculptures to be vehicles for reforming attitudes in our disposable culture. "The best way for artists to help reduce waste is to show how beautiful these materials can be, and what can be done with these seemingly mundane objects. When we think of these things as beautiful, we value them more. If we value our resources, we will waste less."



So what is the artist's role and obligation, if any, to leave the world better, not worse? When Daniel Chester French, a co-founder of the National Sculpture Society, created his masterpiece the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., was there an expectation that he should also be a civil rights crusader? The genius of great art arguably is that it accrues meaning (political, social, humanitarian, spiritual, ethical, and moral) with passing time, assuming a significance that an artist, in his or her own time, could not possibly have imagined. Portrayals of wildlife, especially species now pushed to the edge and that may not survive a few generations into the future, are harbingers.



*Opposite page, top left:* Strutting Pheasant by Don Rambadt, steel, copper, nickel, 18 inches high; *top right:* Nuthatches by Don Rambadt, steel; *from top to bottom:* Sky Play by Don Rambadt, steel; Aspen Gateway by Don Rambadt, stainless steel. *On this page, top to bottom:* Wayne by Sayaka Ganz (2010), reclaimed plastic and metal; Japonica by Sayaka Ganz (2007), reclaimed plastic and metal.





Tony Angell (b. 1940), well known in Seattle, Washington, as a wild land conservationist especially involved with protecting habitat for birds and sea life, is proud to call himself a tree hugger. But he resists coming across as didactic in his art.

Last year, Angell's stone carvings were featured in a major ten-person show, "Modernism in the Pacific Northwest: The Mythic and the Mystical" at the Seattle Art Museum. He was among just three living artists within an exhibition that celebrates naturalistic expressions of art thriving in the region.

"I can't imagine any artist who responds to nature being indifferent to the accelerated degradation of our natural heritage worldwide," Angell says. "While it was not the origins of my artistic expression, perhaps today, in this age, my art is an escape from the grief I feel at seeing the wild community around my home diminished by the greed of our species."

What prompts people into action, Angell believes, is being instilled with hope. Nothing—as Thomas Moran's paintings did for members of Congress—inspires more than encountering beauty. As studies show, the more time people actually spend in nature,



the more likely they are to be empathetic, conscientious, and optimistic.

The American thinker Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods* (2005; 2008) has written extensively about a global phenomenon known as “nature deficit disorder,” most acutely manifest in children who are deprived of regular contact with nature. As a result, they grow up fearful of the outdoors, ecologically illiterate in understanding the importance of healthy environments, and how exposure to them give rise to a richer sensual existence. Harvard’s E.O. Wilson has helped to pioneer the “biophilia hypothesis”—that humans and our fate are inextricably connected to the larger web of life that sets Earth, so far as we know, apart in the cosmos.

At a deep innate level humans feel the bond, but the artifice of modernity—canyons of steel, concrete, and asphalt replacing green spaces; the cacophony of machine noise; the distractions and declining attention spans wrought by our addiction to gadgets—is anesthetizing humankind, Wilson says. He agrees with those who say art can serve as a life-changing touchstone that leads people to reawaken their sentient, interdependent relationship with nature that has gone dormant.

It isn’t just a choice of possibility, he says; the fortunes of all species hang in the balance if we do not wake up to the dire fact that the proliferation of people and our insatiable consumption of natural resources is unsustainable. Wilson’s ethic lives large in Steve Kestrel.

For him, the decline of wildness isn’t an abstraction. Like Tony Angell, Kestrel (b.1948), harvests his raw materials—rocks and boulders—from ancient riverbeds and transforms them, using the direct carving method, into exquisite wildlife sculptures. A biologist by training, a native Westerner who grew up on

*Opposite page, top: Flame by Sayaka Ganz (2014), reclaimed plastic objects, 32 inches high; top: Diver by Tony Angell (2013), serpentine marble, 5 inches high.*

*On this page: Gyrfalcons by Tony Angell (2000), white Carrara marble, 38 inches high.*



a ranch in New Mexico, Kestrel is today in the vanguard of taking on environmental themes. Because he possessed critical standing—his work resides in the permanent collection of several prominent fine art museums—he is not treated as an outlier.

In 2013, Kestrel won the prestigious Prix de West exhibition, hosted by the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. Over the years, the competition has been dominated by two-dimensional work—painted portrayals of cowboys, Native Americans, and landscapes. Kestrel’s work, a conceptual sculpture, *Desert Timeline*, was carved of black slate and Colorado sandstone, portraying a partially fossilized rattlesnake that, like the rivers of time, sidewinds its way through the earth. Not long afterward, Kestrel also produced a complicated multimedia work exploring the perceived dangers of fracking, the controversial technique employed by the energy industry to extract oil and natural gas from deep within the earth. The piece, titled *Fracking* (2013), uses the image of a poisonous serpent going underground, symbolically representing the drilling chemicals used to force fossil fuels out of the ground, some of which pose a threat to freshwater supplies.

Some friends advised Kestrel against delving into such potentially contentious terrain. The artist didn’t hesitate. He plowed ahead. The debate over how energy is produced represents one of the most important of our time, he says. It has implications for water (the most precious resource in the arid West), wildlife habitat, scenic views, and, looming largest, its link to climate change. In recent years, epic droughts that many experts say are caused by global warming have produced large wildfires, some of which have burned nearly to the doorstep of Kestrel’s home near Fort Collins, Colorado.

“We need to be having discussions about the consequences of our actions,” he says. “If I weren’t helping to spur those discussions, I wouldn’t be being honest with my conscience. At the end of the day, I think it’s important to ask: ‘What do we stand for?’”

*Fracking*, a one-of-a-kind work, didn’t cost Kestrel any professional cachet. To the contrary, it elevated his reputation says art gallery owner Bill Rey, who notes that *Fracking* was purchased by a private collector who has amassed one of the most impressive contemporary wildlife art collections in the world. The collector also stated his willingness to lend the piece to museums.

“I’ve said many times that we celebrate ourselves too much and the rest of the animals on the planet don’t get enough press time,” Kestrel says. “Some say the highest form of any artistic expression is the human figure. I say that people who believe that need to get outside a little more, open their eyes.”

I shared Kestrel’s observation with Josiah Black Eagle Pinkham, a cultural historian and ethnographer with the Nez Perce tribe, on a recent visit to rural Idaho. “You don’t see us [native people] often, if ever, naming a building or a mountain or a piece of land after a person. We think that’s inappropriate and the person that you are supposedly honoring would never approve. If they did, they wouldn’t be worthy of respect. Building monuments or statues to honor individual people elevates the importance of one



*On this page:* Desert Timeline by Steve Kestrel (2013), black slate and Colorado sandstone, 9-1/2 inches high.

*Opposite page, left:* Silent Messenger by Steve Kestrel (2005), raven - Wyoming black granite, 60 inches high, sarcophagus - Colorado red sandstone; *right:* Fracking by Steve Kestrel (2013), Colorado sandstone, black slate, bronze and steel, 9-1/2 feet high; Collection of National Museum of Wildlife Art, Jackson, WY.



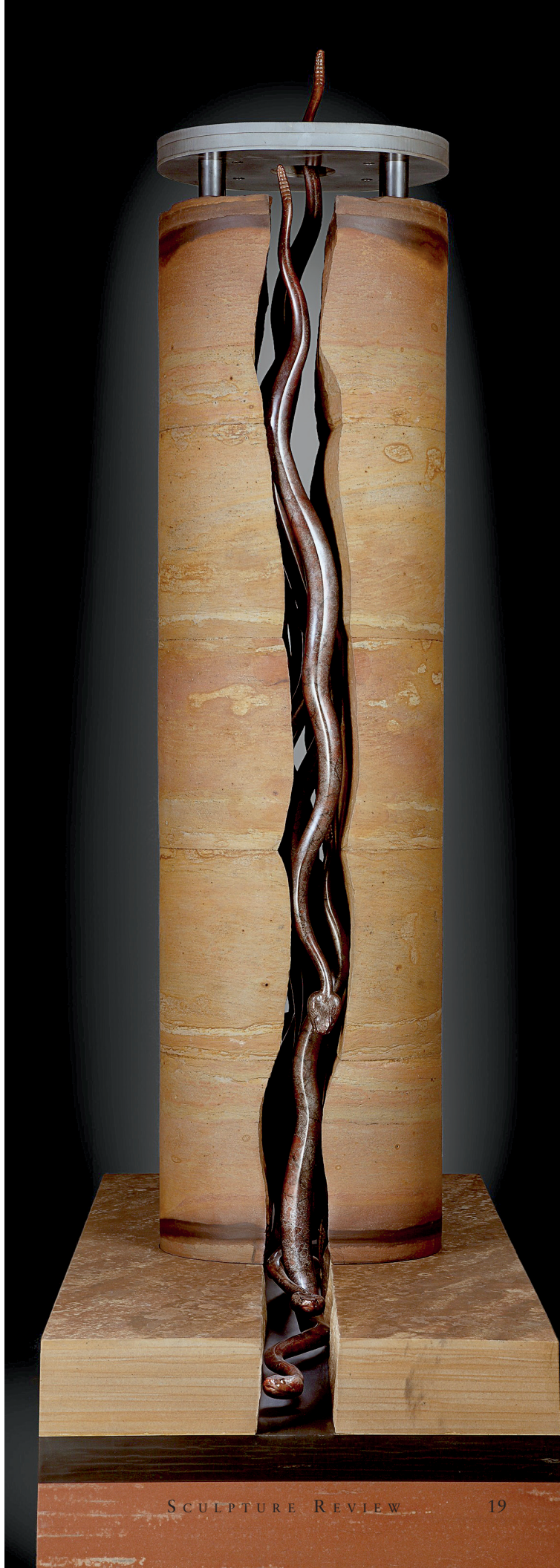
person above the importance of the tribe,” he says. “I look at something like Mount Rushmore and I shake my head.”

Gutzon Borglum’s massive stone relief, depicting the faces of four U.S. presidents, is carved into a mountain in the Black Hills of South Dakota, which are sacred to the Lakota Sioux and other tribes. The artwork is considered anathema and deeply offensive to native people, Pinkham says. On the other hand, Pinkham can relate to the iconography of wildlife as a symbol of tribal and regional identity. Animals, after all, are adopted with human names, represented on totem poles, clothing, ornamental objects, pottery, and weaving; their outlines drawn and painted on tipis and other shelters, and their physical traits associated with the mystiques of certain clans, which also become familiar to individuals who are named after animals and thus share their identities.

Pinkham finds it odd that individual humans, typically white males, are commemorated in statuary that may mean little to modern people or are attached to place names on maps, even though the people themselves never visited the place or had a personal attachment to it. Wildlife art inspired by an animal who is linked to a given point of geography communicates a lot about the setting and the values of the people who dwell there. In jest, Pinkham adds: “Societies that hold up wildlife as being sacred usually don’t let those animals go extinct without putting up a fight.”

When George Carlson, born in 1940 and now living in Idaho, went nearly fifty years ago to study the ancient traditions of the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico, the biggest lessons that he tried to articulate in his resulting award-winning sculpture series was the seamless balance between indigenous people and nature. Inseparable, he says, was the underlying environmental allegory. In *Day of Guadalupe* a young dancer wears a deer antler mask in honor of the Creator, and in *Boy and Eagle II* (1989), a teenager on the cusp of becoming a man works with the great raptor to hunt for sustenance. Both speak to the need for coexistence, which has been hard to achieve.

Photos: Jafe Parsons.



Today, Greenpeace activists boldly taking on whaling ships in acts of civil disobedience, monkey-wrenchers spiking trees to prevent loggers from felling old-growth forests, acts of so-called eco-terrorism carried out at fur farms, factory farms, and primate research facilities, lawsuits brought by environmentalists flooding the courts and deciding the fates of species, and incredible amounts of money being spent to influence the political landscape by resource extraction companies, are conflicts that have sometimes turned violent and ugly.

Few topics inflame an already polarized public more than hunting—and few artists have waded into the fray by being outspoken. Often roiling in the sentiments of anti-hunting and animal-rights activists is the failure to accept the reality that the roots of modern conservation in America were partly planted by those who hunt and fish. Indeed, it's been the “hook and bullet” community, which started with fore-running environmental President Theodore Roosevelt—an avowed hunter—who pressed for enacting anti-poaching laws so that game herds could recover and be harvested based upon sustainable management.

The 191 million-acre national forest system, for example, was set aside in part to safeguard wildlife habitat. In 1908, Roosevelt also established the first national wildlife refuge at Florida's Pelican Island and the system has grown to cover 560 refuges nationwide, encompassing 150 million acres. Millions of acres of wetlands alone, their protection underwritten by the sale of Duck Stamps, were secured thanks to the zeal of waterfowl hunters. In addition, the sale of hunting licenses and a special tax assessed on the purchase of hunting and fishing equipment is vital for keeping both federal and state wildlife management agencies afloat.

The intergenerational legacy of hunting and fishing is a factor in the commercial appeal and financial success of many artists. Sculptors Kenneth (Ken) Bunn, Sandy Scott, Walter Matia, Tim Shinabarger, T.D. Kelsey, Rod Zullo, Chris Navarro, Richard Loffler, and Paul Rhymer, among others, identify with those collectors who call themselves sportsmen and sportswomen. Scott is an avid bird hunter and angler; Shinabarger served as a hunting guide in Montana and taxidermist; Kelsey is a veteran of the African outback who piloted his own bush plane; Matia, a former staffer with The Nature Conservancy, is a wingshooter and has a large following among politically conservative art lovers in Texas; Navarro is an ardent hunter in Wyoming (who recently created a woolly mammoth monument); and Rhymer is a former taxidermist who worked at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, repairing some of the big game specimens first prepared by sculptor/taxidermist Carl Akeley with animals shot by Theodore



Roosevelt on safari. All have a strong collector base among conservation-minded hunters.

Phil DeLone, executive director of Safari Club International (SCI), says that without hunters and hunting organizations, many species would exist only in zoos. And without artists helping to raise money for those organizations, important grassroots efforts wouldn't exist.

“SCI operates globally on the front lines of wildlife conservation, not only here at home in the United States, but in many far-flung places that most people don't often think about. The sporting art sold helps raise awareness and generates funds for bettering the prospects of wildlife on the ground,” DeLone explained to me, adding that millions of dollars have been raised over the years through the proceeds of art sales to benefit conservation and battle poaching, which is taking a grim toll on elephants, rhinos, lions, and many other endangered species worldwide.

“Great art is yet another element that unites us,” DeLone says. “You can vote for the things you value with your wallet, take home something that inspires others, and change the world.”

Kent Ullberg credits his early days in Botswana working as a hunting guide and taxidermist with giving him a stronger

affinity to protect animals as a conservationist. The same with Ken Bunn (b.1938), who didn't go to art school but apprenticed with Coloman Jonas at his taxidermy shop in Denver.

While Bunn's stylistic approach to the animal is often described as being descended from *les animaliers*, his body of work, which contains both North American and African big game animals, appeals strongest to safari hunters with trophy rooms.

This is not to say that Bunn's level of concern for the natural world is any less than his younger peers. In spring 2015, a new Bunn monument commissioned by the National Museum of Wildlife Art is slated to be formally unveiled. The subject is a lone gray wolf, slighter bigger than life-size.

During Bunn's lifetime he has watched predators such as wolves and grizzly bears be nearly eliminated from the Lower 48—an outcome that sits just fine among some of his ranch-owning collector friends. But Bunn has also commended “rewilding” efforts that have taken hold in the West, giving lobos and bruins another chance to refill their vacant ecological niches in places like the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem. Still, in Wyoming over 85 percent of the state allows wolves to be shot at any hour of every day for any reason. Wolves are treated with no more respect than a rat. Is that progress?


As Bunn was conducting field research for *Tribute to the Gray Wolf*, which will occupy a spot at the museum high above the National Elk Refuge in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, he thought of perhaps the best-known portrayal of *Canis lupus* in history: The bronze La Lupa Capitolina she-wolf suckling the twins Romulus and Remus (legendary founders of the city of Rome) at the Musei Capitolini that rises over Rome's ancient ruins.

Bunn's wolf isn't mythological like the one in Rome. His is a salute to untamed wildness, not fleeing or fleeing, but pausing to take a look back into our own eyes, finding mutual recognition. “Where you find the intensity of the animal in an artwork, you'll also find the intensity of an artist,” he says. And good work, the best kind, he notes is full of feeling and passion for the things one cares about. “It is,” he adds, “about searching for, and finding the life force. The kinds of relationships that we have with other species on this planet are special.”

Bunn has been chagrined as his hometown of Denver and the Front Range of the Colorado Rockies, once known for their quaint natural appeal, have been transformed into a humming megalopolis. “It's a paradox,” Bunn says. “There's hardly an answer. It hits you in the back of the head. The question to find balance of compatibility between human needs and the needs of nature is not working the way you want to see it. I don't think art should tell you what to think. Art that is worth being remembered raises good questions.”



Long ago, Rapa Nui people carved at least 887 massive moai monoliths on Easter Island. They still stand, though the civilization that created them has collapsed. We know not why, yet they are reminders that art can be objects of elegy as well as eulogy.

Today, the most important question facing artists and all of humanity is an existential one, for preserving nature is not merely about interpreting the aesthetics of beauty. Understanding all the interlocking pieces of nature is central to our own survival and the kind of planet our descendants will inherit. What good is great sculpture anyway if people are not around to enjoy it and decipher its portrayal of truth? 

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Todd Wilkinson has been writing about the environment, art, and culture for nearly thirty years. He is the author of several books about artists, and the recent critically acclaimed book, *Last Stand: Ted Turner's Quest to Save a Troubled Planet*.

NOTE:

All quotes, with the exception of the one from *The New Yorker*, are personal communications with the author.

*Opposite page:* Day of Guadalupe by George Carlson (1975), bronze, 25 inches high, part of the Tarahumara Series. *On this page:* Tribute to the Gray Wolf by Kenneth Bunn (2010), bronze, 24 inches high, the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson, Wyoming.