

KEN ROWE

‘The Harder You
Work, the Luckier
You Get’

By Clover Cameron



Petunia, bronze, 13" by 17" by 6 ½" Photo credit: Christopher Marchetti

"As a child growing up in Arizona, I heard many intriguing stories about people keeping javelinas illegally as pets. One day, several years into my sculpting career, I received a phone call from the director of Adobe Wildlife Rehab Center in Phoenix. It had just received a 3-month-old imprinted javelina (being raised as a pet) and she thought I'd appreciate the opportunity to sculpt this little one while the center prepared her for rehab and release back into the wild. Finally, it was my chance to see how affectionate these creatures really are. It was love at first sight!

"Whenever I entered her enclosure, she would instantly greet me with a pattering noise, roll over onto her back, and want me to scratch her belly. As I scratched, she would move her rear leg like a tickled dog and simultaneously stick her little pink tongue out. When the director witnessed our interaction, she gave me the honor of naming my little friend, who I dubbed Petunia. I think of precious little Petunia often and hope she is in Hog Heaven! If truth be told, these one-of-a-kind critters with so much character are some of my favorite wild animals!"

“It’s another day in paradise,” says sculptor and gallery owner Ken Rowe, savoring his view of Sedona, Arizona’s, snowcapped mountains. “We’ve been here 28 years now, and I never tire of it.”

(Left) Blue Rain, bronze, 21" by 12" by 10 ½"
Photo credit: Christopher Marchetti

"This piece was created while observing these magnificent blue herons at a rookery three miles from my art studio. I was easily inspired by the elegant posturing and displaying that breeding pairs would perform at the nest. Long, slender necks and beautiful plumage simply add to their grace. The blue heron itself is a work of art; I find inspiration in its natural beauty."

A self-described Arizona boy through and through, Rowe was born in Phoenix to an electrical engineer and an amateur painter—a combination Rowe credits as foundational to his art. “Growing up, without even knowing it, I had this wonderful influence of the mechanical aspect of life through my dad’s career and the artistic pursuits from my mother’s side,” he says.

Although his mother never made a career of her painting, she took it seriously. “My mother took a lot of private classes in painting,” Rowe says, “so I would sign up and go with her. Before I was 10 years old, I had a chance to attend private classes: watercolor, oils, landscapes, portraits, still lifes, everything. I

guess I always thought I would be an artist of some sort.”

But, as tends to be the case with these things, Rowe’s path was anything but linear. “Life opened certain doors, and I walked through them,” he says, adding that, in the 1970s and 1980s, Phoenix experienced a huge construction boom. “There was money to be made. I got into drywall and went from high school to being a journeyman drywaller for 10 years. I made a lot of money, and it was really great.”

During those years, a chance encounter opened the next door Rowe would walk through. “I was introduced to taxidermy through one of my coworkers,” he says. “He was having something mounted—a fish



Vantage Point, bronze, 21 ½" by 67" by 38" Photo credit: Dr. Richard Henderson

"After 36 years as a bronze sculptor, I have never had a more profound and career-changing experience than when I had the opportunity to sculpt Simba, a mature, male mountain lion that was bottle fed as a cub and raised by a gentleman in Montana. Simba was 140 pounds of chiseled stone for muscle, covered with a veneer of soft velvet hair.

"For three days I had the amazing opportunity to study, interact with, and sculpt Simba in the field as my live model. My obsession with big cats, their anatomy, and their fluid grace, along with the opportunity to take physical measurements of his every dimension, combined with resources and invaluable references acquired from my years in the taxidermy profession, the stage was set for me to have the perfect blueprint to create this piece. It is out of respect and reverence, along with a healthy sprinkling of fear, that I was compelled to tell Simba's story in bronze."



Expect the Unexpected, bronze, 12" by 53" by 9 ½" Photo credit: Christopher Marchetti

"On the plains of the West, it is an old story to hear where a wolf pack is found in stealthy pursuit of a bison herd, waiting for that chance opportunity when a lone bison falls behind. But, as quickly as the winds change, the hunter might just become the hunted. Where nature is involved, you never know when to expect the unexpected."

or something—and I went with him to pick it up. And I went, ‘Ooh, this is interesting. It involves anatomy; it involves animals. I’ve got to learn about this.’ So I started working weekends for this guy who has a taxidermy shop, and fast-forward in time and I’m doing it full-time.”

Rowe later married Monica and, after their first anniversary, he opened a taxidermy shop but found it a challenge to make a living at it. “It was a real learning experience,” he says. “If you do it right—making the animal as lifelike as possible—it takes a long time. After about the seven-year mark, I was just totally burned out. We had an amazing accountant who would always have these wakeup calls for me. He’d say, ‘Ken, what are you doing? You’re not making any money. You’re not going to get anywhere. You need new pursuits.’”

Rowe had long had a fascination with sculpture and decided to have a go at it. “I took a college class in sculpture at one of the community colleges,” he says. “It was one of those hammer-over-the-head moments: ‘Oh, this is what I’m supposed to do!’”

Thus began a difficult but transformative period of Rowe’s life. “I started sculpting by night, taxidermy by day for months and months and months,” he says. “I visited some galleries and they told me what they expected. And if you’re a starving taxidermist and the galleries say they want a body of work, and then you go to a foundry and say, ‘How much is this gonna cost?’ It took me nine years of working both taxidermy and sculpting to get to the point where I could quit the taxidermy profession.”

That transition from taxidermist to sculptor is a tale of equal parts grunt work and crazy luck, and it started with a Hail Mary trip to a convention in Phoenix. “It was called the Federation for North American Wild Sheep,” Rowe says. “It’s kind of like a safari club; it’s huge, and it was the first time in history it was held in Phoenix. So I rented a booth and put all the money I had into it. One half was my taxidermy work and one half



Making Waves, bronze, 11 1/2" by 8 1/4" by 5 1/2" Photo credit: Christopher Marchetti

“Whether flyfishing the remote rivers of Alaska or waters closer to home in Oak Creek Canyon, Sedona, part of the process of sculpting fish (which I jokingly call ‘research’) involves catching the various species. After taking measurements and gathering information I need to sculpt their likeness and essence, they are released back into the waters to continue with their life journey.”

was my sculpture.

“The harder you work, the luckier you get. I met Troy Murray [owner of Scottsdale-based Troy’s Cowboy Art Gallery]. It was a huge break for me. He said, ‘Bring me your favorite pieces, and we’ll talk

about representation in my gallery.” Murray requested three new pieces, including backdrops, as a sort of audition, and Rowe produced them within three months.

“I sculpted like Edward Scissorhands!” Rowe says. “I didn’t eat;



Rowe's next big break came by way of a program on PBS. "Ken Payne was a pioneer when it came to being a gallery artist," Rowe says. "He had three galleries in Sedona, and he was a really accomplished Western artist. He also had a local-access show, 'Sculpting With Ken Payne.' It was a big deal. I would sculpt at my kitchen table with him every Sunday morning, learning about sculpting the muscles and armature and bones.

"One day, there he is at Troy's gallery, looking at my work! So I introduce myself, and he says, 'Where's your work?' I said, 'You're looking at it.' He says, 'Give me your phone number.' Two days later I get a phone call [from him] saying, 'I have an offer that you cannot refuse.'"

Payne proposed that Rowe become the main artist in one of his three galleries. "Do it full-time," Payne told him. "Close your taxidermy shop, and I guarantee that, if you don't make \$3,000 a month in sales, I will pay you that much."

Rowe said yes, and he never looked back. He and Monica sold the taxidermy business, sold their house in Scottsdale, and moved to Sedona. "Literally overnight, I was a working artist in a gallery in Sedona thanks to Ken Payne," he says.

The arrangement was ideal for Rowe, who finally had the time to produce a substantial body of art. It was also a win for Payne. "He never had to pay me a dime," Rowe says

Frequent Flyer, bronze, 16 1/2" by 12" by 6" Photo credit: Christopher Marchetti

"To the phenomenon of flight, add a flash of abstract colors, the beat of strong wings, and a long, elegant, and graceful tail – all of which define a rooster pheasant defying gravity in the most exquisite way possible."

I didn't sleep." Murray was pleased with the pieces and would have agreed on the spot to take them on, but a logistical impediment emerged: He did not have space in his gallery to display the three pieces.

Thinking quickly, Rowe drew on his taxidermy experience. "What if I

build an artificial rock, vertical, with spaces for all three of my pieces?" he asked.

Murray agreed, Rowe constructed the pedestal, and soon his three sculptures were in Murray's gallery. "They sold really well," Rowe says.



Cheep Transportation, bronze, 10" by 30" by 5" Photo credit: Christopher Marchetti

"I have always worked with live models to best capture the essence of the animal sculptures I am creating. Feathers, a rescued Gambel's quail, was one of those live models. Feathers' owner would accompany him on his 'modeling' days to the gallery, where he would delight my collectors and gallery visitors. Studying my animated friend and his habits, combined with my own field observations, has enabled me to portray these astonishing little creatures all the better. Quail are great parents, and you know spring has arrived when you see the scenario played out as I have depicted in in this piece."

with a laugh. "I had to absolutely pinch myself at the life I was leading. Sales were phenomenal. It was just a dream."

After a dozen years, Rowe and Monica decided it was time for a new role: gallery owners. "We'd always dreamed of having a space in Sedona but those spaces just never become available. But then there was the recession, and a space did come up, and I thought, 'Grab this up now or you'll never have the chance again,' so we did. The first space that came available was a little, upstairs gallery, just 875 square feet. I totally remodeled it. I made concrete countertops and pedestals and everything before we opened."


Once again, hard work and luck soon converged for Rowe. "Some of

the most coveted space in Sedona is right under the bell tower," he says. "It's architecturally so beautiful. The occupant of that space had had it for 38 years, decided to retire, and came to me. 'I want you to have this space,' he said. 'It's a legacy.' And he made it happen."

Rowe works in the gallery three days a week and spends the remainder of his time mostly sculpting or thinking about sculpting. He mountain bikes and fly-fishes, always packing his binoculars just in case. All of his sculptures are from life. "I sculpt like a plein air painter," he says.

He treasures opportunities to get close to the animals he depicts. "There's an amazing array of animals I've had the absolute honor of working with, from wolves to griz-

zlies to mountain lions to rhinos," he says. "In many cases, I've been able to handle the animal and then sculpt right in front of them. It's hard to describe how it actually feels to handle an animal like a grizzly, to feel how strong it is and the texture of its hair, to let it breathe on you."

Rowe pauses to marvel at the life he leads and the path he's traveled. "I just feel blessed that I can do this for a living; life is amazing," he says. "Everything in the past influenced what I'm doing today. All those life experiences, even the hard ones, make me a sort of conduit for the work I produce. Without the hardships, I wouldn't have the depth." 

Clover Cameron lives in Trout Lake, Washington.



Ken Rowe

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