
ANIMAL MAGNETISM



Mick Doellinger's sculptures of all kinds of beasts pulse with kinetic energy

BY NORMAN
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SCULPTOR MICK Doellinger knows his subjects from the inside out. Literally. Like great wildlife and animal artists of the past who dissected the beasts they portrayed to help them capture the most lifelike renderings possible—including 18th-century English sporting painter George Stubbs and 19th-century French sculptor Antoine-Louis Barye—Doellinger brings to his work a life-

long, firsthand knowledge of the many creatures whose likenesses he casts in bronze.

The results of such an intimacy with his subject matter are sculptures that seem to pulse with energy, as if turning one's head away for even a moment will reveal some new movement at the next glance. A rhino charges in **BRUTE FORCE**, his forward motion so kinetic



Brute Force, bronze, 23 x 49 x 16.

that the earth around him all but seems to rumble. A longhorn, standing still in TAIL WIND [see page 48], feels as if his powerful breath is audible.

Contributing to the impact of Doellinger's sculptures is a style he describes as "representational, with the detail and anatomy all there, but with a looser texture some people would call impressionistic." That quality derives

from "tweaking the clay," he says, in the final stages of preparing the original sculpture from which the mold is made and the bronzes cast. "With the looser texture, you might notice something different every time you look at it—a hole here, a smudge or fingerprint there," he adds. The results of such bravura work are representations that, put simply, feel alive.

"I CAN'T REMEMBER a time when I wasn't absolutely fanatical about animals," says Doellinger. Born in Germany in 1956, he was 18 months old when his parents moved the family to Australia, where he and three younger brothers grew up in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. He was always bringing animals home, which "drove my parents nuts," he admits. Young Mick's menagerie included rabbits, guinea pigs, ferrets, snakes, a hawk, a sparrow hawk, a pony, horses, dogs, and cats. Dogs especially fascinated him. "As a boy, I loved touching them, picking up their feet, smelling their [paw] pads," he recalls. Around the age of 10, he found part-time work in the neighborhood walking greyhounds for local dog-racers, "and I'd have two or three dogs bouncing around on the end of the leash," he says.

In school, he remembers, "I wasn't a very good student. But my exercise books were covered with drawings of dogs and horses." After a family visit to the natural history collection of the Melbourne Museum, he also developed a fascination with taxidermy, going on to learn about and exercise his rudimentary skills on rabbit skins, displaying his efforts on a bedroom shelf alongside jars with snakes preserved in alcohol.

He had his initial hands-on exposure to sculpture at the age of 11, when a friend of his father's and uncle's took the family to visit William Ricketts (1898-1993), a famed potter and sculptor, who had set up his home, studio, and sculpture gardens in the rainforest about a day's drive east of Melbourne. Famed for his sculptures of Australia's aboriginal people, Ricketts "gave me some clay, and I did a little sculpture of a head," Doellinger recalls.



representation

Fama Fine Art, Houston, TX;
Mockingbird Gallery, Bend, OR;
Settlers West Galleries, Tucson, AZ;
Trailside Galleries, Jackson, WY;
The Sportsman's Gallery, Ltd. & Paderewski Fine Art, Charleston, SC, and Beaver Creek, CO;
Wykeham Gallery, Stockbridge, Hampshire, England.

upcoming shows

Society of Animal Artists annual exhibition, Briscoe Western Art Museum, San Antonio, TX, through January 5, plus additional venues.
Dallas Safari Club Convention, Dallas, TX, January 9-12.
Masters of the American West, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA, February 8-March 22.
Wildlife Discovery, **Trailside Galleries**, Jackson, WY, February 17-29.
Night of Artists Exhibition & Sale, Briscoe Western Art Museum, March 27-May 3.

When he was about 15, Doellinger developed an interest in rodeo, a sport almost as popular in Australia as it is in North America. More than just spectating, he set out to compete, starting off riding bulls and broncs. By his late teens, he'd moved along to the dangerous event of steer wrestling, in which he continued competing as an amateur up to the age of 28, even testing himself against American cowboys in California for nine or ten months in his early 20s. "I was enthusiastic but never a great cowboy," he says, summing up those efforts with a chuckle.

Doellinger had also embarked on an-

other full-time career at 15, starting a four-year apprenticeship as a butcher. "My fascination came from going with my mother to the butcher shop," he says. "I loved seeing the whole sheep and pig carcasses, and the beef in quarters. I was fascinated by the bones, how the sheep's rib cages were shaped like birds' wings, the anatomy, the whole mechanics and beauty of how the joints flexed and everything moved." By the age of 20, he'd progressed to more lucrative work in meatpacking plants.

During his brief rodeo sojourn in California, Doellinger met a couple of professional taxidermists. Applying

his butcher's skills, he did some work for them, expertly skinning birds, deer heads, and even whole bears. "That was where I learned the basics," he says. Back home in Australia, he continued doing taxidermy on evenings and weekends, improving his abilities; when he was laid off from the meatpacking plant at 28, he set up as a full-time taxidermist.

Eventually, based on his own detailed anatomical studies of animals, Doellinger developed a sub-specialty in sculpting the polyurethane forms on which modern taxidermists mount the skins of animals for the most true-to-



Tail Wind, bronze, 15 x 23 x 8.

“ There are so many different things to do, so many different compositions. I get carried away just thinking about animals. ”



Loud Mouth, bronze, 13 x 14 x 7.

life presentations. A taxidermy supply company in Oregon licensed the rights to his designs and began paying him royalties.

In the process, with such an “intimate knowledge of what was going on inside the animals,” Doellinger began trying his hand at fine-art sculpting and eventually decided to pursue it as a new career. But that decision presented one major problem: “There is no way to make a living doing representational art in Australia,” he says of a market that strongly favors modern art.

A friend who had moved to Texas suggested that Doellinger’s new pursuits

might be met with a more favorable reception there. So in 2003, he applied for and was granted a three-year work visa and headed for the Lone Star State, later getting his green card.

For a while he continued to earn his livelihood doing contract work for a taxidermy shop while sculpting in his spare time. That gradually began to change, however, after a customer who had come to the shop saw one of his sculptures and commissioned a piece. More commissions followed, word spread, and then Martin “Bubba” Wood, founder of the widely respected sporting art gallery Collector’s Covey

in Dallas, began selling his works. By 2006, Doellinger had become a full-time sculptor.

TODAY, Doellinger lives with Katrina, his wife and business partner and a professional photographer, in the Texas countryside outside of Weatherford, about 20 minutes west of Fort Worth. Bordered by a creek, their sloping five-plus acres provide him with ample space to conduct his thriving artistic endeavors, including a 1,500-square-foot sculpting studio and a separate 2,600-square-foot building where he



Distant Bugle, bronze, 27 x 22 x 13.



Defiant, bronze, 18 x 25 x 10.

applies all of his own patinas and stores crates for shipping his bronzes across the country and around the world. All the casting of his sculptures is done at a foundry in nearby Arlington, TX.

Every sculpture begins with an idea, sprung from the urge to capture the essence of a particular animal. “My mind bounces around a lot,” says Doellinger. “I’m not a person who has a list of what I want to get done.” Sometimes the inspiration will come from his and Katrina’s travels—including several trips to Africa, where he’s managed to get up close, if not personal, with black and white rhinos, giraffes, hippos, Cape buffalo, and other species.

On occasion, the animals even come to him, as happened when three Fort Worth police cars recently pulled up to his property. “I’m sure the neighbors thought I was a drug dealer,” Doellinger laughs. In fact, the officers were escort-

ing a trio of police dogs, including a Belgian Malinois, a breed with a lithe body and loyal personality, slightly smaller in size and with higher-set hindquarters than the similar German shepherd. That Malinois became the model for what Doellinger eventually titled *K-9 SERVICE*, which now stands as a monument in the K9 Cemetery at the training complex for the city’s police and fire departments. In March 2019, it was officially recognized as one of the more than nine dozen works (and counting) in Fort Worth’s public art collection.

Such prestigious commissions bespeak a sculptor whose skills and artistry are fully realized. Yet Doellinger feels no complacency about the stage he’s reached in his true calling. In fact, he remains as enthusiastic as the young boy in Melbourne who was first besotted by his chosen subject. “I would like to do some larger-scale projects,” he

says, mentioning plans to embark on another research trip to Africa in 2020, as well as future fly-in trips he hopes to make to remote areas of Alaska and the Yukon to witness bears, moose, and other indigenous wildlife in their natural habitats. “There are so many different things to do, so many different compositions. I get carried away just thinking about animals.” ❖

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Mountain Living* and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.

See more of Doellinger’s work at www.southwestart.com/featured/doellinger-m-dec2019.