



*Sculpture is an art of the open air. Daylight, sunlight, is necessary to it, and for me, its best setting and complement is nature.*

- HENRY MOORE



# BRINGING BRONZES TO LIFE

## THE MYSTERY AND MAGIC OF PATINAS

What is it about bronze sculpture that is so captivating? At Tlaquepaque exquisite bronze examples of cowboy culture, Native peoples and wildlife can be found all over the property and in the galleries. Stand before a Vic Payne bronze like the “Capture of John Colter” at Mountain Trails Gallery and you are a witness to both the drama and intensity of a particular event in history that tells a powerful story in flawless, authentic detail. Or venture over to the Ken Rowe Gallery and feel the soulful nobility and power in the eyes and gazes of Ken’s lifelike wolves and mountain lions. Loet Vanderveen’s work presented at Vue Gallery displays the deep respect the artist feels when capturing the essence of his beloved animals... elephants, rhinos, polar bears, springboks, giraffes, panthers and cheetahs, to name a few. His distinctive bronzes, each with signature gold accents of highly polished bronze, and many rendered with colorfully rich patinas, are immediately magnetizing.

Every bronze has a story and how that story comes into being, from the vision of the artist to the gallery installation. It is an arduous, and somewhat mysterious process. It can take months of research and sketching—not to mention the sculpting itself—before a new piece heads to the foundry. That is where the alchemy takes place by a team of exceptional artisans with their own specialties. Clay, wax, sand, crazy fire and sparks, super hot molten bronze, and lots of sweat come together like some gritty dangerous dance that results in the bronzes we get to appreciate. Potential failures, pitfalls and do-overs are always lurking in this sometimes 20- to 30-step collaborative art process.

“Patina (the final finish) is a controlled

oxidation process producing any color and any effect from stone to marble to wood,” explains Ken. Some artists perform their own patina process, or as in Ken’s case and a number of other world-class sculptors in Mountain Trails Gallery, they look to Erik Peterson, a multi-talented artist from

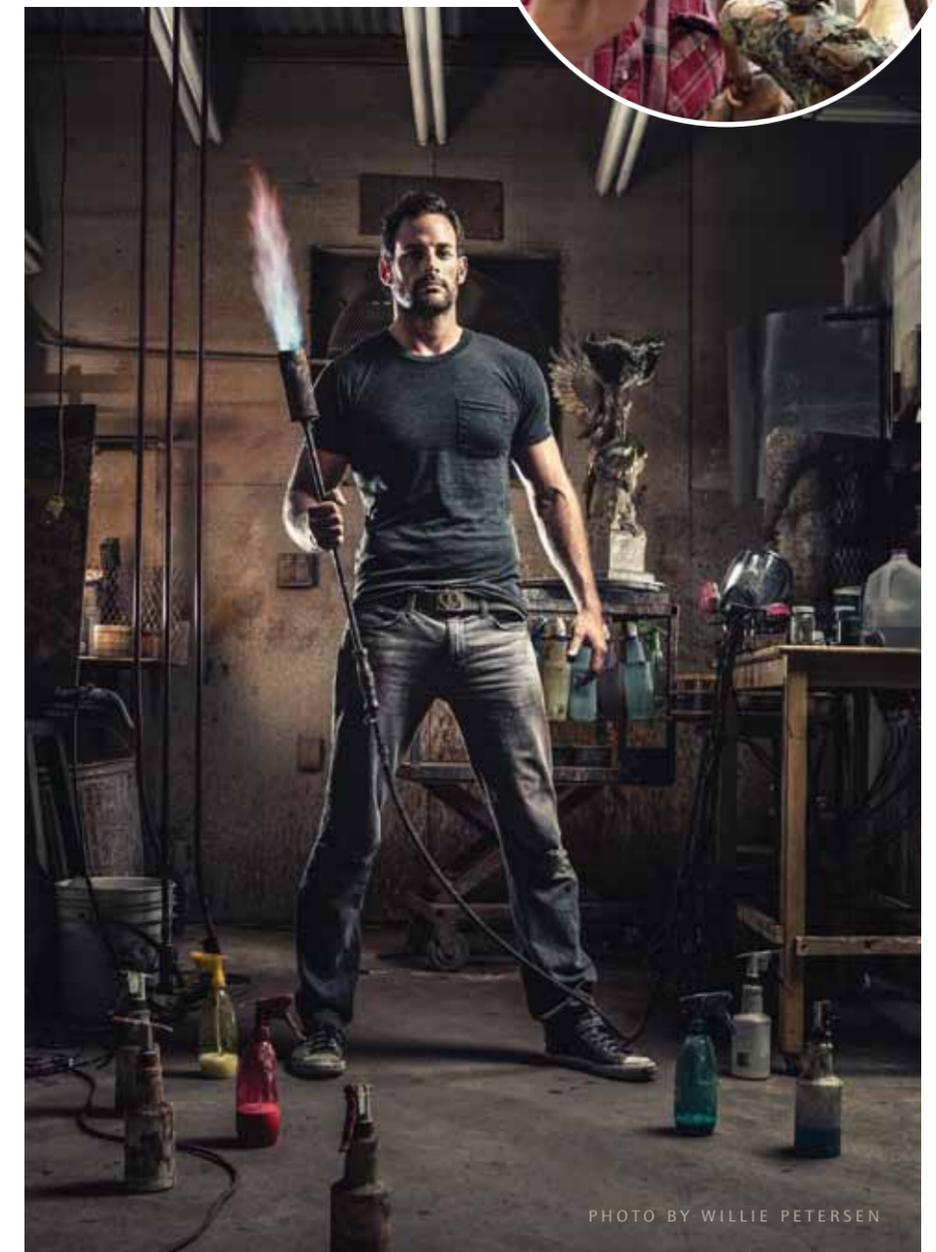


PHOTO BY WILLIE PETERSEN



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Prescott, Arizona, who has a special gift and passion for the patina process. Ken, one of the top Western wildlife bronze artists, humbly expresses how collaborative the bronze process is and that the magic that brings his beautifully sculpted pieces to life occurs in the foundry where many hands make it possible.

"I give Erik and his team of artists a canvas in a sense. When I have sculpted a

bear or buffalo, for example, I hand it off to Erik for the patina phase. I know he will make the piece look as good as he possibly can. His eye for texture, detail, shading, line, and where the viewers eye will rest is what he'll bring to the process," says Ken. The trust and friendship between Ken and Erik has formed over 15 years of working together. "It's extraordinary what he does. Erik Peterson is an amazing artist and one

of the most remarkable human beings I have ever known." From Erik's side there is equal humility and admiration for Ken. "I feel a strong connection to most artists I work for...I feel what they feel. I make their vision a part of me when I get into the patina process." Shying away from any descriptions of him being masterful, Erik says, "If I could spend a month with Ken Rowe just doing patinas and showing him some of the tricks I have learned he would be almost as good as me. That's how talented Ken is as an artist."

Ken explains how Erik works. "Initially he'll heat the bronze piece to 300 to 500 degrees depending on type of patina. Then he'll take various chemical nitrates and start applying those with an airbrush, a regular brush, or a sponge. In his other hand is his blow torch. The heat accelerates the oxidation process. He's meticulously painting with heat and chemicals, waving the torch back and forth, airbrushing and repeating the motion." Amazingly, one piece may have 10 different chemicals to achieve an array of tones, textures and colors. And then there are different airbrush nozzles for detail work. There are so many choices, options and approaches that Eric might deploy because of his 20 years experience collaborating with some of the most renowned bronze artists in the country. Take Kim Kori's very literal and whimsical style with her beloved animal sculptures. "She has the perfect style for very literal patinas," Ken explains. "Every dot on a geckos back has to have the right color. And for additional detail after Erik finishes the patinas, Kim will use acrylic washes and enamels to very subtly enhance her bronze." What's really difficult in the overall patina process, Ken continues, "is when a nice brown undertone receives too many passes of the torch, and that brown goes to burgundy then to purple... then to the sandblaster to start all over again because it got too hot."

Julie Williams, owner of Mountain Trails Gallery, has been in the gallery business for some thirty years. She could probably teach Western American history and culture at the graduate level she's so knowl-

edgeable, and she loves telling the stories of her gallery's bronzes and the visions of her artists. Call her a bronze whisperer! "For figurative work, patina is really key. If the patina on a human face is too dark it won't be realistic looking," says Julie. She explains that her gallery's artist-in-residence and world-class sculptor, Susan Kliewer, "chooses really beautiful translucent patinas to accentuate the natural light on a person's face." Susan also works with Erik. Julie continues, "When you look at a figurative sculpture the first thing you see is their eyes and then their entire face, and that's how we connect to people. So for collectors to connect to artwork they really have to be drawn into the faces of the characters being portrayed in bronze. And that is where the patina is so vital. Patinas breath authenticity into bronzes with all their subtleties and nuances."

Julie talks about the action and majesty conveyed in Susan's "Teton Warrior" bronze and how many of the Native women depicted in her pieces look so feminine and so empowered. A Navajo woman shaking out a newly woven blanket in the bronze called "Trading Day" shows all the right colors, textures and blanket design— even the underside—and is both respectfully authentic and historically accurate. All due to the exceptional skill of the patina artist.



PHOTO BY WILLIE PETERSEN

Back to Vic Payne's piece, you will see highly detailed and hyper-realistic depictions of the Crow Indian's attire to the point where the execution and patina of his deer hide leggings are so realistic you'd swear they were the real thing. Walking through the gallery, Julie points out specific details that have to be right, patina on a rifle barrel, locks on a Pony Express saddle, or the navy pistols, the trademark of Wild Bill Hickok.

Discover the vast variety of bronze styles, some smooth and highly polished like Loet Vanderveen's approach. Or Joshua Tobey's humorous bears that look like and feel like stone. Easy to pull off? Not at all. "In a smoother stone-like piece the patina is much more complex. It can show every imperfection because the surface has to be flawless," says Ken. At Mountain Trails Jason Napier's distinctive quail family sculpture called "Training Day," is vibrantly strong. Each patina finish is the result of deep attention to detail and the vivid colors bring out the strength and character of his charming animal subjects.

Set aside some good browsing time for the galleries, and if bronzes resonate, take time to ask questions. Who knows...maybe you'll find that special piece that speaks to you and becomes a part of your life and a legacy piece for generations. ■

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