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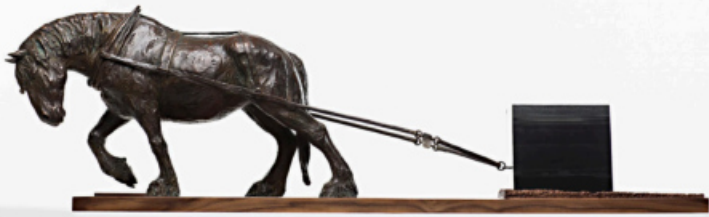
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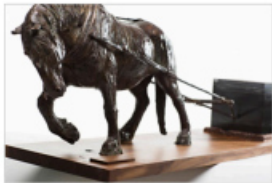
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INTERVIEW BY JILL NOVOTNY



THE STORYTELLING SCULPTURES OF TYREL JOHNSON



The Huntress

Opposite page:
Continuance of Action
Below: Continuance of
Action detail



Left: Sculptor Tyrel Johnson at work in his studio.

Can you tell us a bit about your career as an artist? When did you know it was what you wanted to pursue?

I grew up playing and creating in my father's bronze foundry. Being the youngest, I had many great teachers. I always said I was going to grow up to be an artist, and in my twenties, I really dug into acquiring skill through seven years of intense anatomical studies. I then had to loosen up for about two years by doing quick sculptures to let go of the meticulous and embrace my inner expressions.

I did not want to market or sell my work until I could stand back and know that I had become the skilled artist that my childhood self had dreamt of. I remember the day that occurred: I had completed a sculpture of my 5-year-old daughter about to kiss a toad and said out loud, "I'm good enough." I studied design for quite some time after. I knew I hadn't found the right path to express my gifts yet. Woodworking was my hobby and art, my goal. One day I had had a rough day at work—I was running my own construction company. I came home, drilled a big hole in a piece of wood, sculpted an owl inside, and sold it that night. It was obvious that I had found a way to express myself—and that limitless potential will keep me busy until I die.

The short few years following my first completed bronze and wood pairing have been surreal, to say the least. I knew it was beautiful and that no one else was creating the way I do, but I did not expect the magnitude of recognition that I have received. It makes me tear up writing about it. My inner child is giddy with excitement, and I am grateful to a depth that only a difficult journey can render.

Can you speak a bit about your family, your father's work, and being one of 16 kids?

In my family, there are ten boys, two girls, and four adopted brothers. I always joke and say that mom and dad were determined to get it right. Hence me, the youngest. It was tough in a lot of ways. My parents, who are my personal role models, took in lots of people in need.

When I was six, there were 26 people living in our home. We all often went without as a result, but I would betray the most admirable parts of my character, wishing it away or resenting it. We are a very skilled group of people. My dad started a foundry to cast his own sculptures—we all worked there. We sculpted and cast many monuments, most of which were my father's artworks. We also cast work for many artists over the years. I worked all phases, as did most of us, and ended up settling in metalwork. You should see our family's yearly white elephant gift exchange. It is epic, with beautiful handmade gifts in nearly every package. I am grateful to have had such an upbringing.

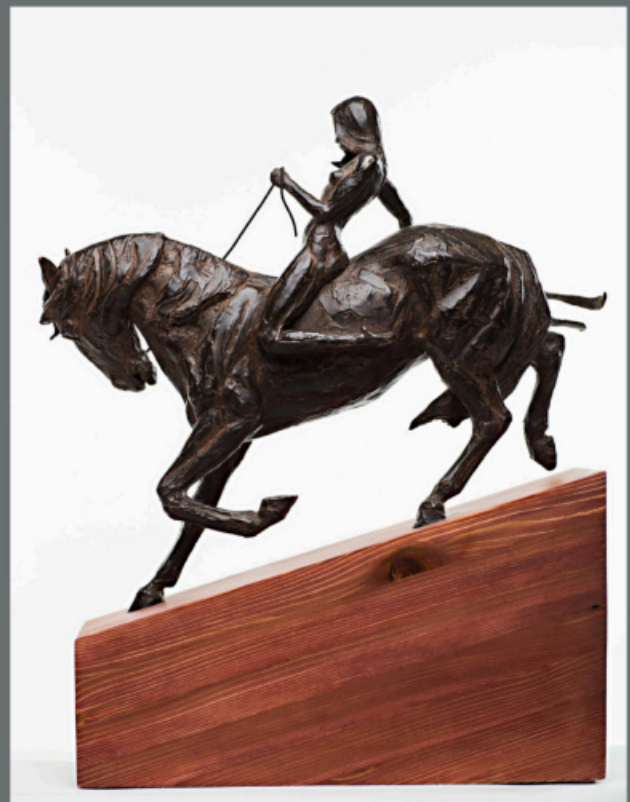
Animals play a large part in your work; what do you feel animals bring to your art?

I have always loved animals. If I wasn't outside finding them, I was inside learning about them. Animals help tell the story I want to impart in a way that would be impossible otherwise. I also think that animals help us relate to parts of ourselves in a way that can never be seen as negative on a personal level. I want unconventional pairings that elicit something new in the viewer.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 80



Undivided Love



Caution to the Wind
Opposite page: Horse
of Another Color



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 76

Do you have experience with horses or riding? What is it about horses that inspires you to sculpt them?

We had 30 Arabians when I was really young. I have profound memories of seeing them run so gracefully with their tails unfurled. I was never much for riding them, but I loved being around them and watching them. Though a horse's beauty is enough to inspire sculpture, I think their human-like qualities help tip the scales from my perspective as a storyteller. There are so many possibilities for me to explore and many beautiful breeds to convey them.

"Undivided Love" is a sculpture that expresses the connection between a horse and a girl. Can you tell us about that piece and what inspired it?

The idea came when I was troubling over what to make for a friend's charity auction. I had heard her beautiful story of how she acquired the horse she started her equine charity program with. She was going through a very difficult patch in her life and would visit this horse on a dirt road every day heading to her home. After two years of this daily therapy, the horse's owner heard about this woman visiting her horse. The owner decided to give her the horse on the spot. I wanted to capture

the feeling she must have had despite the barbed barrier between them. When I sought out models to create the current larger version, I picked a horse who turned out to have a young owner who had just barely won a battle with leukemia. She hadn't seen her horse for seven months. Naturally, I asked her if she would pose for the sculpture with her horse. It is a beautifully conceived sculpture that anyone can relate to with two distinctly heartwarming stories to tell. Being able to share those stories and emotions through art is one of the many reasons I love what I do.

What are your goals when you create your work? Do you begin with a complete story in mind, or does the idea evolve as you create the piece? What informs your choice of materials?

My goal is always to bring something that transcends beauty to the viewer. I want my work to give its owners a positive feeling every time they walk through the room where they've placed it. I want it to be beautiful and elegant yet simple. Their hearts are complex enough to fill it with countless meanings or moments that I couldn't dream up if I tried. If something beautiful wells up within them because of my art, then I have succeeded.

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