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# THE BRONZE MENAGERIE

*Michael Tatom evokes the animal world in his sleekly stylized sculptures*

BY NORMAN KOLPAS

WHEN MICHAEL TATOM was a sixth-grader in his hometown of Los Alamos, NM, he was obsessed with choppers—motorcycles that have been modified with stretched frames, large front wheels mounted on extended forks, tall handlebars, and exaggerated vertical backrests. While his fellow students were working on their lessons, he recalls, “I would take a pencil and sharpen it to a needle point. And I would make detailed drawings of choppers no more than an inch long, complete with all the spokes and the nuts and bolts.”

So well-rendered were those drawings that even his teacher was hard-pressed to take exception to the budding artist’s disregard for his schoolwork. “Instead of chastising me,” says Tatom, “he would just say, ‘Oh. That’s cool!’”

A couple of years later, Tatom’s artistic skills found a far more practical, goal-oriented outlet. An aspiring folk-rock guitarist, he had his heart set on a Yamaha FG-360 acoustic guitar. So his dad—who worked as an engineer at Los Alamos National Laboratory but designed and built houses on the side—





◀ Large Standing Fox,  
bronze, 12 x 14.  
Laying Kit and Sitting Kit,  
bronze, 5 x 7 x 6.



### representation

**Sorrel Sky Gallery**, Santa Fe, NM,  
and Durango, CO;

[SorrelSky.com](http://SorrelSky.com)



**Longhorn, bronze, 10 x 22.**

cut a steady supply of perfect pine and aspen boards for young Michael to use. “I painted detailed owls and eagles on them and sold them at weekend craft fairs until I had enough to buy that guitar,” he recalls.

Ever since, Tatom has pursued his quest for artistic expression with that same combination of unwavering determination and attention to detail. Those characteristics led him, over almost four decades, to become a successful custom jeweler; then to expand his creativity into creating sleek bronze animal sculptures, including many creatures of

the American West; and eventually to transform some of those sculptures into smaller-scale jewelry, including rings that, you might say, literally bring his career full circle.

**DESPITE HIS** early displays of talent and dedication, Tatom didn’t think that he might become a visual artist. His first dream was to make music as part of Driftwood Junction, a band he formed with three high-school friends. He wrote some of the songs himself, and he still plays his own compositions to

this day on that very same old Yamaha he bought in his teens.

During those high-school years, an unexpected turning point came when Tatom’s mother enrolled in a silver-smithing class focusing on Navajo-style shadow-box jewelry, in which a domed section with a cutout window frames a turquoise stone set on a flat surface below it. “She taught me how to make those,” he says, “and I started doing a lot of pierce work, using tiny jeweler’s saws to cut out eagles and other designs in silver and mount them on bracelets.”

The talent he showed in that work,



and the pleasure he derived from it, led him to enroll in a jewelry program at the University of New Mexico after graduation. During his two semesters at UNM, a teacher told him about the six-month design program offered at the Gemological Institute of America, which was then based in Santa Monica, CA. Tatom applied and was admitted to its class of only 12 students. He moved west and immersed himself in the intricacies of wax carving and casting, jewelry design and fabrication, engraving, and stone cutting. "We worked on all sorts of odd little things," he marvels, recalling the variety and breadth of that education. "I even made a tiny set of silverware, a knife, spoon, and fork all only three-quarters of an inch long."

After completing the course, Tatom moved up near San Francisco, where one of his high-school bandmates had settled. He stayed in the Bay Area for 10 years, working in jewelry stores at first but soon setting up shop in his garage to create custom gold jewelry that he sold mostly through word of mouth.

**EVENTUALLY**, familiar landscapes and family ties drew him back home to New Mexico, where he settled in Santa Fe. That move, in turn, eventually got him involved in sculpture, an art form both of his older brothers, Kirk and Steve, were pursuing. "They taught me how to work in stone, and I sculpted a number of dolphins and birds, a fox sitting on a cactus, a pair of salmon jumping upstream, and a fish hawk"—also known as an osprey—"who'd caught a fish in his claws." It was a marked departure from working on a tiny scale with a jeweler's loupe in his eye. "In stone, I tried to keep it simple and not do all the details," he says.

He didn't show his stone sculptures in any galleries, but he sold them here and there to collectors who'd heard about them. Then, about 25 years ago, while helping his brother Steve begin to cast some of his own small sculptures in bronze, Tatom thought to himself, "You know, I should probably try doing some animals in bronze, too." His first such efforts, completed in 1994, were a small bear, a puma, and a wolf, and he

took the finished pieces to Packard's on the Plaza, a landmark Santa Fe business from 1944 until it closed in 2013. "They said, 'Yeah, we'll try them.' And my bronzes started selling," Tatom recalls.

The artist found a new sense of satisfaction from these sculptures. "It was fun to be doing something where people didn't need to put glasses on to look at them," he laughs. That early success led him to submit and be accepted into the

widely respected Sculpture in the Park show held each year in Loveland, CO, in which he participated for seven years starting around 2003.

Tatom brings the same meticulous approach to his sculptures that he does to his jewelry. Working in the studio of the home he shares with his son Spencer and their pugs Mogli, Rhino, and Pickle, each of his bronzes begins with the simplest of sketches. "It's usually



**My Acorn!, bronze, h3.**



**Quarter Horse, bronze, h12.**



Large Buck, bronze, 18 x 14.



Small Elephant, bronze, h5.

just an outline, a side view, a silhouette of the animal in the same size I want the sculpture to be," he says. He then attaches the drawing to a slab of carving wax, pokes holes through the outline into the wax, and rubs baby powder through the holes. Once that's done, he says, "I draw a line like connect-the-dots and cut that out using a band saw, and I perfect that with different grinding tools to get a perfectly silhouetted animal."

From that point, he explains, "I find where the animal's spine is and cut away all the excess material, doing most of the work with a rotary grinding tool called a barrel burr. Once I get to the point where I have all the animal's muscle facets and planes, I take files, pointed gravers, and scrapers to refine it. Then I'll polish it with paper towels and an orange solvent to get rid of any scratches."

The completed wax block is all sleek, minimalist surfaces. It combines the essence of the animal with sensuously curved organic shapes that are reminiscent of the plant world—"the edge of a rose bloom starting to open, the swirling vortex of a calla lily," Tatom says. And it becomes the basis for casting limited-edition bronzes using the lost-wax process. For the larger works that Tatom has begun creating more recently, he follows much the same process, except that he starts with a large block of clay built up around a classic sculptor's armature.

**REGARDLESS OF** its size, the final creative step on a Tatom bronze is finishing it with highly detailed patinas. "These guys who do patinas have spent their whole careers developing formulas and techniques that are pretty amazing," he marvels. He admits that, detail-oriented artist that he is, he sometimes finds himself wishing he had the time and training to do them himself. "I feel a little bit like I'm cheating because I didn't. But I tell myself I'm the art director in this case."

Whether artist or art director, Tatom's discerning eye and entrepreneurial spirit have led him not only to create ever-larger pieces but also to



**Large Puma, bronze, 7 x 15 x 9.**

scale down his sculpture to work as jewelry. A bronze he sculpted of a resting kit fox, for example, got miniaturized and recast to become a ring that sells steadily through his Etsy shop, called *Of Beasts & Beauty*. A wide menagerie of other bronze, silver, and gold animals—bears, hedgehogs, cats, dogs, sharks, snakes, horses, and buffalo—can be found there as well, not only as rings but also charms, pendants, bracelets, and more.

For Tatom, there seems to be no end in sight to the creative possibilities in sculpting the world of animals or the

satisfying challenges they present, however big or small. “I’ve always been attracted to animals, and I just love sculpting them,” he says. While he thinks of himself as an artist firmly rooted in the American West, he finds himself attracted to any creature “that moves in a certain way. So elephants and cheetahs were irresistible,” he adds. Working occasionally on a larger scale now, he looks forward to the chance to add a little more detail to future pieces, such as suggesting some of the feathers on birds. But don’t expect him to return to the sort of fine rendering of those early

chopper drawings. The pleasure comes, he says, in doing “work that’s representational and elicits a powerful response without need of all those details.” ❖

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 Tatom’s work at**  
[www.southwestart.com/featured/tatom-m-aug2019](http://www.southwestart.com/featured/tatom-m-aug2019).