

THE SCULPTURE OF Tim Cherry

by Marcia Preston

His cats are lean as linguine. A fox spirals like ice cream from its ears to a dollop of bushy tail. Though Tim Cherry doesn't advise taking a bite, he does approve of the viewer's impulse to trace a hand along the cool curves of his smooth, fluid sculptures.

There's something decidedly delicious about the fluid lines and smooth surfaces of a Tim Cherry sculpture. For him, the design is the thing, and curvilinear forms his *modus operandi*. He emphasizes shape and rhythm while simplifying detail. "Capturing the grace and elegance of my subjects is a primary goal," Cherry says.

Grace and elegance, yes. But with an attitude.

Some of Cherry's sculptures are as lyrical as a sonnet, but the artist is also brave enough to have fun. One cannot resist smiling at the sinuous length of a cougar called *Snake in the Grass*, and there's a definite sense that the artist is smiling, too. Responding with a groan to the whimsical, globe-shaped porker in *Hog Heaven*, one patron said, "That's just how I feel when I've overeaten!" Be that as it may, the bronze edition nearly sold out within four months after issue.

Cherry blends his knowledge of animals and of sculpting with strong, clean designs that move beyond simple representation. Yet emotion isn't lost in his sweeping, art nouveau forms. Mood seems to arise from the subject itself, rather than being humanized or superimposed on the animal. *Royal Red*, for example, defines the natural dignity of a red fox. Allowing design to overshadow anatomy, Cherry molds graceful shapes and fur masses into a regal robe that suggests nobility. A deep, rich patina adds to the illusion of fox fur.

For *Garden's Edge*, arguably his best-known work

(the *Wildlife Art* cover image, May/June 1996), Cherry reinforces the proprietary air of a long-eared, reclining rabbit with a warm gold patina. His eight-year-old daughter dubbed the creature Bufford, a moniker that seems to fit.

Despite the blend of elegance and subtle humor, Tim Cherry isn't British as one might expect — especially after hearing him address a colleague as "my dear." Born in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, Cherry grew up in southeastern British Columbia (B.C.) where he developed a love of wildlife and the outdoors. At fifteen, he began working summers as a guide for a hunting outfit, which took him into northern B.C., the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories. Even now, though he no longer guides, Cherry travels north each summer from his home in Missouri to spend a month or two in the field "recharging the batteries," he says.

"The north country is magical and a sacred part of me, not so much as a specific image, but spiritu-

Catitude (bottom), bronze, 5 x 14 in., 1996, by Tim Cherry

Artist Tim Cherry (below) standing next to his 84 x 48-in. cast-bronze sculpture, *Northern Heights*





Antlers in the Willows (above), bronze, 10 x 14 in., 1993, by Tim Cherry

Tranquil Waters Fountain (right), bronze, 24 x 32 in., 1995, by Tim Cherry



ally. In these isolated areas, hundreds of miles from the nearest road or community, the landscape is breathtaking, wildlife everywhere. It is hard to explain the feeling," he says, but anyone who's visited wild places understands the call.

For a decade and a half, these excursions have offered Cherry invaluable opportunities to observe animals in their natural environment. On occasion, encounters have come almost too close, a fact the six-foot-one, mustachioed artist seems to relish.

"Once we were backpacking in the far northwest corner of B.C. and set up camp on a high

ridge among small evergreen trees," Cherry recalls. "At dusk, tucked away in our bedrolls, we heard a wolf howl from the bottom of the ridge, then a rumble of hooves heading straight down the ridge toward us. We poked our heads out of the tent just in time to see several caribou run past less than three yards away. I looked up the ridge and saw another [one] heading straight for us — with a wolf hot on his heels! They ran right into camp.

"The wolves had those caribou set up perfectly in a relay run. It was amazing. But we spoiled their hunt and the caribou got away."

If Cherry's early ventures into the wild were his initial preparation for wildlife sculpting, a second phase began right after high school. With no idea of making fine art a career, Cherry wrote to noted taxidermist Forest Hart, asking to work and study with him. Hart's letter inviting him to Hampden, Maine, arrived on Tim Cherry's nineteenth birthday.

For the next three years, he mastered animal anatomy from the inside out. Hart specialized in sculpting manikins — the artificial bodies used by taxidermists. Starting with a skeleton, Cherry learned to sculpt the muscles back onto the body with clay. A fiber glass mold was then made from this model and used for reproductions.

Although he enjoyed the work, Cherry wasn't quite satisfied doing taxidermy or manikin sculpture. Coincidentally, Hart was completing his first bronze sculpture at that time, and he introduced his young protégé to the process. "I knew this was it," Cherry says. "Then it became a matter of how to go about doing it."

In 1988, while still living in Canada, Cherry met noted sculptor Dan Ostermiller who invited him to Loveland, Colorado, and became his mentor. "Dan gave me the opportunity to begin my career," Cherry says. Over the next several years, he worked in the studios of Ostermiller and Fritz White, making molds and enlargements,

doing odd jobs, and learning from other sculptors, including Garland Weeks.

"I've been incredibly lucky to spend time and work with the people I've most admired. From Fritz I learned direction, enthusiasm, and perseverance. He's a great teacher and designer," Cherry says. "He taught me the importance of mass and volume, and gave me the confidence to keep trying different options, never quitting on a design."

White also gave Cherry the opportunity to try stone carving in his studio. Working with softer stones, primarily alabaster and soapstone, which

don't allow fine detail, Cherry began to develop his unique vision. He concentrated on exploring new possibilities and moved past the legacy of realism he had gained from his background in taxidermy.

"My grassroots are in art nouveau," he says, "because that period was so design oriented. I've always loved sweeping lines and voluptuous curves. So I started combining the elements that meant the most to me — along with simplifying details and exaggerating forms." His sculpture began to take on the bold, stylized shapes that have evolved into his signature style; more than that, he was having fun.

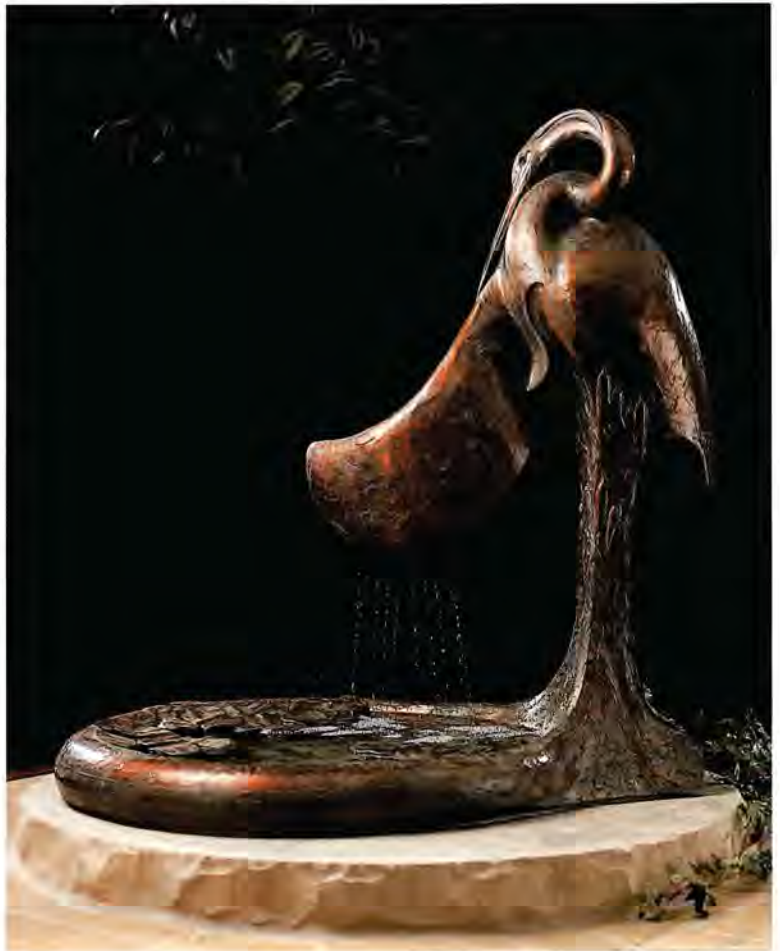
In 1996, at the mellow age of thirty-one, Cherry was elected to membership in the National Sculpture Society. Established in 1893, the society is the oldest organization of professional sculptors in the United States. Cherry was thrilled. "All my heroes of yesterday and today are in [the society]." The National Sculptors' Guild, headquartered in Loveland, Colorado, also tagged Cherry for membership in 1996.

Cherry is a regular exhibitor in the annual *Sculpture in the Park* event in Loveland. Two castings of his *Night Shadow*, a curvy crouching cougar, face-off at the formal entrance to Benson Park Sculpture Garden, host venue for that exhibition. Cherry's sculptures also traveled with the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum's *Birds in Art* national tour and with the Society of Animal Artists' *Art and the Animal* exhibit in 1995.

John Kinkade, owner of the Columbine Gallery in Loveland, says Cherry's unique style attracts architects and interior and landscape designers who are placing the work within larger designs. "At the same time, we have a number of patrons who are hunters or wildlife enthusiasts who appreciate his ability to capture the essence of the animal," Kinkade says. "We don't often see that kind of feedback, from such varied directions, on the wildlife art we handle." Collectors also appreciate the fact that Cherry's bronzes are issued in small editions. His work is currently represented by six galleries in five states.

Gestures and experiences with animals provide ideas for the young sculptor, but more often he is inspired by forms and shapes. Then he chooses an animal he is familiar with that works well with the design. "It has to say something, sculpturally, for me to pursue an idea," he says. "I will not sculpt a piece for the sake of doing a particular animal."

He loves the initial stage of the creative process — organizing lines, volumes, and negative spaces into a harmonious whole — but then comes the tedious work of actual completion. He gets excited again when a new piece comes out of the foundry, where he does his own finish work on each newly cast bronze. He does it himself, in part, to keep overhead costs down and to reduce turn-around time, but also because he believes a sculptor should learn everything about each step in the process.



Graceful Blue Fountain (above), bronze, 36 x 34 in., 1994, by Tim Cherry

Midnight Melody (left), bronze, 3 x 6 in., 1996, by Tim Cherry

However, patinas (the surface coloring of bronze that results from both natural and artificial oxidation) he trusts to the expertise of Loveland craftsman Pat Kipper. "This is an art form in itself, and Pat's the best there is," Cherry says. "With the smooth finishes, I have a huge palette of options available. Since my work leans toward contemporary, I enjoy colorful, lively patinas. To me color is an important part of the sculpture."

As an outdoorsman, Cherry is drawn to outdoor and garden sculpture and has launched a successful

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Pelican's Roost
(above), bronze,
15 x 9 in., 1994,
by Tim Cherry

Treetop Watch
(right), bronze,
15 x 7 in., 1996,
by Tim Cherry

Snake in the Grass
(below), bronze,
18 x 108 in., 1995,
by Tim Cherry

line called the Garden Works Collection. With dimensions of three to four feet, these medium-sized sculptures and fountains are appearing in corporate headquarters, restaurants, and private homes across the continent. Cherry likes the format — large enough to make a bold statement, yet small enough to be moved around — and also the challenge of using water as a design element.

A curved stream of water completes the circular design of a forty-two-inch-high piece called *Beaver and Branch Fountain*. For another, Cherry created pools inside the sweeping tails of a pair of peacocks. The ten pieces currently available in his Garden Works Collection are intended to be suitable for indoor or outdoor settings and for private gardens.

One of the artist's leisure-time goals is the development of his own backyard garden, including sculpture by other artists as well as his own. He and his wife, Linda, bought a home in Branson, Missouri, which they're gradually renovating. As Cherry's business manager, Linda handles much of the marketing and communications with collectors, galleries, and upcoming shows, which allows Cherry more time in his home studio.

There, across from a lake, on what he describes as "the artist's side of the street," Cherry works in an airy, high-ceilinged studio with a stone-carving room under construction in one corner. Getting back into stonework is one of his goals for the coming year.

Meanwhile, a sinuous cougar reclines on the worktable as if he owns it. Linda says that for several weeks the animal appeared to dance. "Every time I came in, its legs had changed to a different position." Now, though, the piece is finished. The feline stretches out with supple grace, glancing back over its shoulder with an impish flip of its tail. The gesture seems suitably symbolic. Cherry calls it *Catitude*. □

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Artwork courtesy of Tim Cherry, Branson, Missouri. Photos by Mel Schockner.

