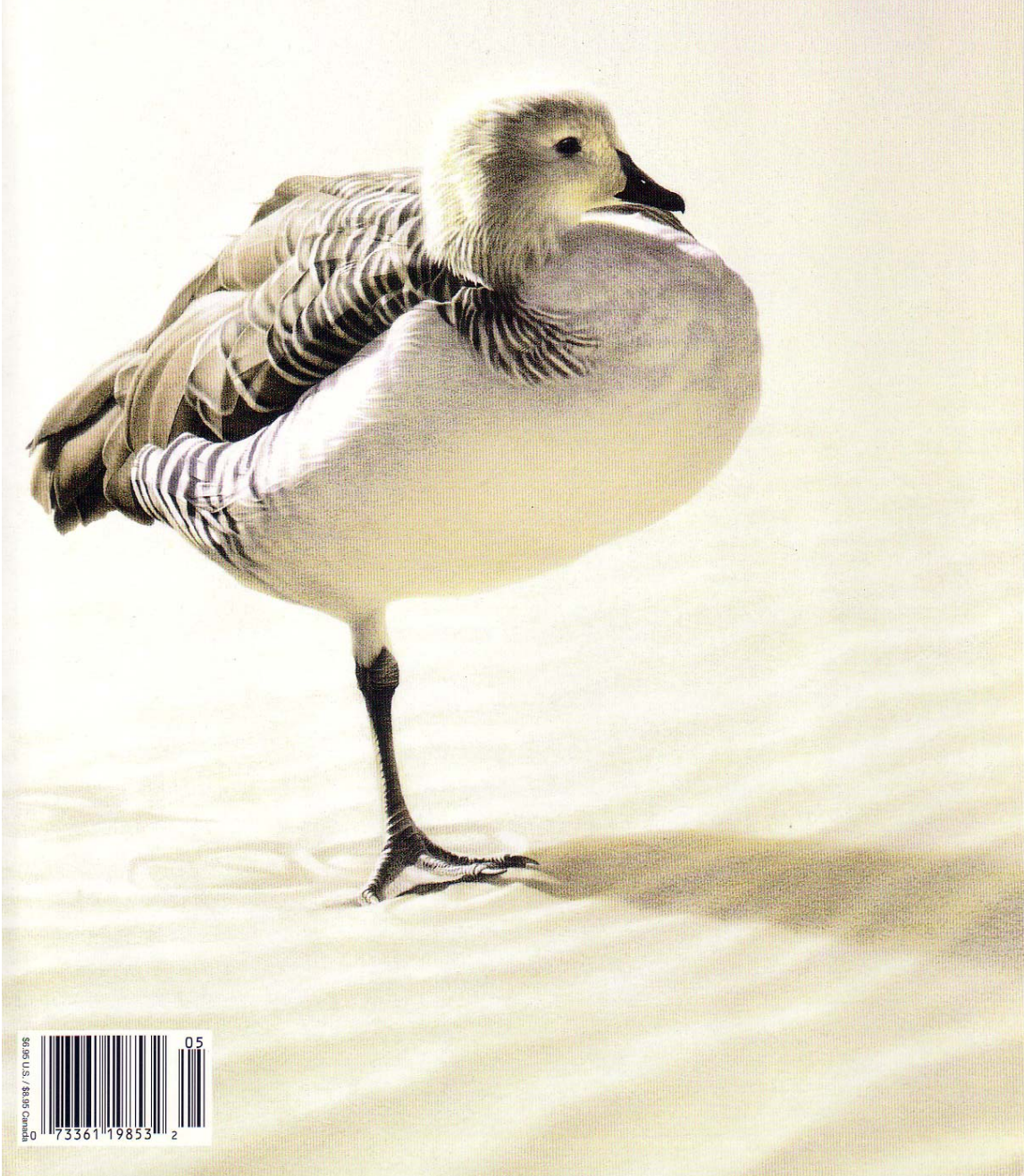


# WILDLIFE ART

The Art Journal of the Natural World

Volume XVI No. 3

May/June 1997





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Photo collection

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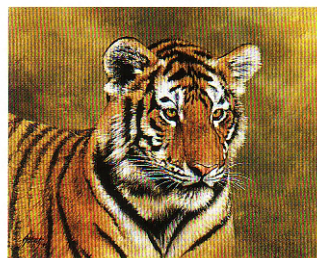
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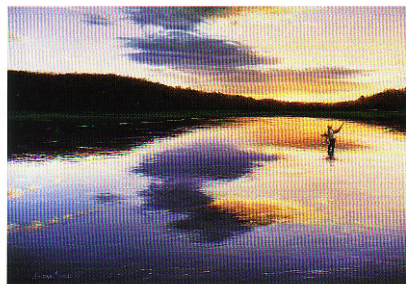
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Edward Aldrich, Broomfield, Colorado

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Oil painter Edward Aldrich captures the essence and mystery of his animal subjects, as in *Tiger Cub*.

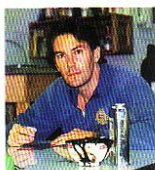


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# A Distinctive Voice

by Rebecca H. Rowland



Chris Bacon's paintings are as much about birds as they are form and light. Controlled but not contrived, subtle and yet persuasive, the elegant little jewels he creates are decidedly distinctive.

Chris Bacon works on a copper plate for an etching.

*Stonechat* (below), watercolor on Arches paper, 12½ x 7 in., 1994, by Chris Bacon



In a world overwrought with distractions, Canadian artist Chris Bacon has somehow managed to remain separate, focusing all energies on his art. "I have always felt that I must remain relatively detached, uninfluenced as much as possible, and work in near isolation in order to maintain my own vision as an artist. It is my only hope of producing work that is my own."

In fact, Chris Bacon's life and art are so closely intertwined, it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. Nestled at the center of this union are the birds that inspire him. "I just like painting birds," he says in a serious yet soft voice. "I seem to have some kind of connection with them. The more I learn about them and watch them, the more fascinated I become. I never get tired of watching them in the wild and can't imagine what this place would be like without them."

Translating this fascination into small, finely rendered watercolor, watercolor pencil, and alkyd compositions consumes most of the thirty-six-year-old artist's waking hours. Living in what he calls the smallest house on the block, Bacon enjoys his modest fourth floor, old-style condominium in Burlington, Ontario, Canada, that affords

him a treetop view from his studio window. His routine is rigorous, often keeping him up well into the evening, day after day. Whether he's putting the final traces of color on an image or sketching thumbnails of a new idea, a day rarely goes by when he doesn't paint. "I always have to be working on something," he says. "I don't feel like I'm worth anything if I don't have something on the go. I hate wasting time."

His pace, however, is measured and careful. "I work things up slowly, sit back and look at every step, and weigh the pros and cons of it," he says. "In watercolors you have to work everything out from the very beginning, right down to the highlight on the bird's eye. There's very little space to move. I can't make adjustments later."

Bacon demands a great deal from himself and his art. Each piece must be better than the one that preceded it. "There's no point in pursuing another painting that isn't as good as the last one you finished," he asserts.

While this pursuit of excellence is admirable, it comes at a price. A few years ago, he hit an impasse. "I went through a phase when I couldn't paint anything that I thought was worthwhile." After much struggling, he found, "It was just a matter of getting to the next little fork in the road."

This cycle of frustration and growth is all part of keeping his work fresh and new. As he says, "I don't want the work that I have been doing to become stagnant. I don't want to exhaust this path I've taken or make what I've done any less precious. That's the hard part, knowing when not to overdo things. What the next stage will be, I don't know."

When asked if he thinks Bacon pushes himself too hard, friend and fellow artist George McLean suggests, "Chris is not his own worst friend. He's just doing something that is not easy to do. A lot





more artists should pay attention to that. What is the point of doing the same thing over and over and over again? You won't find any of the artists who work hard at what they do who are very complacent about it."

Bacon's disciplined dedication to art began early in life. Born in England, he traveled extensively with his family before they settled in Bur-

lington when he was fifteen. Encouraged by his parents, Bacon channeled much of his energy into his art, and by his late teens was selling sketches. His professional career was launched at his first gallery show in 1980 at the Alice Peck Gallery in Burlington — he was only nineteen at the time. In the first five minutes of this exhibit, he sold all twenty-two of the watercolors on display. Far from

*Untitled — Sandbill Crane*, watercolor on ragboard, 20 x 17 in., 1996, by Chris Bacon



In the *Semipalmated Plover*, "The idea was to conceal the bird without concealing him at all using an illusion called enhanced brightness." — *Chris Bacon*

an anomaly, this success was just the first of many accomplishments for this young artist, who is considered by many to be one to watch in the years ahead.

Annually, over the last ten years, he has been juried into shows such as *Art and the Animal*, sponsored by the Society of Animal Artists, and *Birds in Art*, at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, in Wausau, Wisconsin. Other acknowledgments include several Awards of Excellence from the Society of Animals Artists, inclusion in books like *Best of Wildlife Art* and *Painting Birds — Step by Step*, published by North Light Books, and participation in the 1994 Artists for Nature Foundation European Crane Migration Project in Extremadura, Spain.

He also has a loyal and growing body of collectors in North America and farther afield. According to Janet McNaught of The McNaught Gallery in Hamilton, Ontario, Bacon's works are a strong draw for her. "People are very excited about seeing him mature and make a real contribution," says McNaught who has known Bacon since his second one-man show at the Beckett Gallery in Hamilton in 1982. She has enjoyed working with him since then and watching his artistic development. "People who have bought his paintings come and see his new ones and try to figure out where their paintings fit in the progression."

Because of his methodical and studied approach, a new work by Bacon can be hard to come by. Some of his paintings take weeks to complete while others take months. One image of a crane (pictured on page 27) began in a dream and consumed the better part of last year. Exacting a high toll in time, energy, and income, it kept him from completing other works. In the end, though, it was worth it because of the special significance the painting holds for Bacon.

In this twenty-by-seventeen-inch watercolor (which is large for him), a crane bathed in light stands unwavering in wind-contoured

sands. Above it, menacing fingers of mist swirl in a domed sky, and at its feet, grasses tip away from the same wind that continues to reshape the ground on which the crane stands. And yet it remains resolute in its stance, entranced by the small egg shape before it, as if there was no wind, no light, no shadow.

The finishing touch for this work is a twenty-four karat gold handcrafted frame. At the top, the frame mirrors the arch of the sky. "It enhances the top of the bird and gives it a sacred feel. It looks a bit like a religious icon. That's the way I always dreamed it would be," the artist relates. Yet untitled, this work was recently purchased by the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum for its permanent collection.

More than simply an image of a crane, the painting is about Bacon and his desire to separate himself and his art from outside influence. "Allegorically speaking," he notes, "this painting reflects that sense of isolation — mentally, spiritually, and physically. The crane, representing myself, stands riveted, centrally located in its own space. This does not have to mean a physical place, but a spiritual one. The elements he faces represent all the outside influences bent on steering me off course. The irony being that in some cases a deviation could be for the sake of my own survival. The concentration or focus is on an egg shape — a symbol for life, more specifically my life and my work."

"I feel fortunate that I am able to pursue my art," he goes on to say. "At times, it all seems too unreal. That is why I felt it important to convey a 'dreamlike' quality in the piece. To achieve this end, it seemed logical to make the whole thing up — let my mind's eye sculpt the elements. With the exception of the crane, no reference support was used. As well, the colors are complimentary, and assist by canceling each other out — so that when one focuses on the main subject, the foreground blurs becoming less predominant."

One of his greatest challenges with this work was maintaining a sense of believability without losing the dreamlike quality. "If I had decided to use reference on the sandy hill, it would have lost its kind of surreal quality," Bacon explains. "Establishing how wind might sculpt the gullies of sand and the way light would play on them, meant getting in there with my pencil and almost becoming those elements."

This determination to 'get in there' and figure things out on his own has been a common thread in Bacon's life. Self-taught, he has struggled through many painstaking stages of learning. In his early twenties, he focused on detail, which was in a way a necessary evil. "I couldn't paint the way I paint today if I didn't go through that. Back then I was learning to see. I had to see what made a partic-

*White-breasted Nuthatch*, watercolor on Arches paper, 8 1/4 x 3 1/2 in., 1994, by Chris Bacon





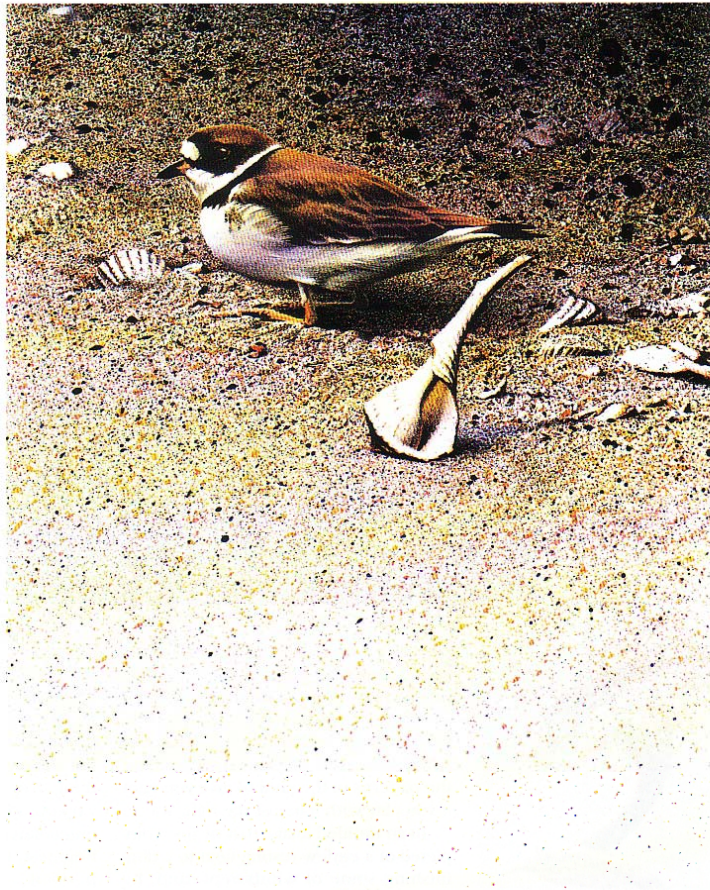
ular bird so unique, what the essence of that bird was. I learned how to recognize those very subtle elements."

About ten years ago he began to move beyond the detail and instead look deeper into the defining qualities of art. "I think the turning point was when I realized the potential to produce more exciting work if I started to concentrate on the painting as a whole. That's when I started trying to figure out what design meant and what composition was, and to see what worked with my approach to painting birds."

Bacon was already pushing himself in this new direction, but a little goading from fellow Canadian McLean probably didn't hurt. "When I used to see his stuff ten years ago, I used to really hassle him and tell him that making paintings has nothing to do with all of the details you put into the feathers and stuff," McLean notes with characteristic candidness. Excited about the direction the young artist's work has taken since those early years, McLean quickly goes on to say, "He is doing very good work, and it does look different than anybody else's. It's technically very well put together with a sense of design and concept that is quite unique."

Though it still requires a degree of conscious restraint, Chris Bacon continues to step away from the detail with every piece. "I realized that you didn't need to paint a lot of detail to make things look real," he explains. "For example in *Light Waves*, a painting of a Magellan goose — in the belly on that bird and the highlight on the side there is no detail. All I'm dealing with is form. The only place that I have suggested detail is the marginal area between the light and the shadow."

Bacon saw the goose that inspired this painting standing on a frozen lake at a nearby waterfowl park in the middle of winter. As he watched it trying to doze, he got a soothing and gentle feeling from it that he eventually wanted to capture in a painting. To do this, he placed the goose in what he felt was a more appropriate yet accurate setting or "stage," as he calls it. "He ended up being in this warm, diffused, atmospheric morning light on a beach in Patagonia. I knew if I put him in some kind of rocky stage you wouldn't get quite the same feeling as if I had echoing, soothing patterns [in the sand] billowing out from the bird." *Light Waves*, our cover image, received much praise at *Wildlife: The Artist's View* at the Woodson Museum



*Semipalmated Plover* (above), waterless lithograph on Arches paper (five colors, one silkscreen), 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in., 1996, by Chris Bacon

*Plovers Sketches* (left), watercolor on Arches paper, 9 x 11 in., 1995, by Chris Bacon

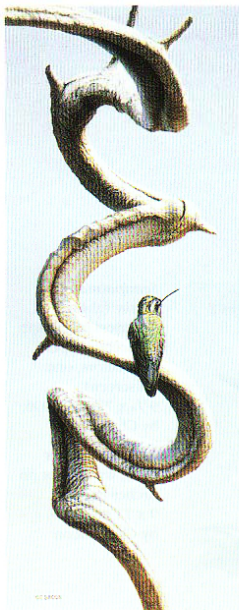
in 1996, won the Elliot Liskin award for Representational Painting at the Society of Animal Artist's 1996 show, and was released last year as a limited edition print by NWF Editions, Vienna, Virginia.

In *Light Waves* and other more recent works, light and sand are key ingredients. "I have been trying to figure out what light is," he says with obvious fascination. "It's almost like I've used the



*To the Sea — White Stork* (right), alkyd on rag/panel, 15 x 15 in., 1995, by Chris Bacon

*Purple-throated Mountain Gem* (below), watercolor on Arches paper, 34 x 14 cm., 1994, by Chris Bacon



sand as a tool or vehicle to explore the light. I know light is impossible to paint but you can give the impression of it if you're very careful. It's such a subtle thing and so is the way light plays across patterns in sand — you can almost use the patterns in the sand to give you light if you play with it in just the right way."

In an untitled image that he just completed of a curlew resting next to a diminishing spine of windswept sand, he tackled light once again, but this time with greater subtlety. The seeming absence of color in this work is quite deceiving. "There's actually a lot of color in it," he says. "I painted the bird, all of the foundation underneath the bird, and the shadows in the gully with a brush. But then I took watercolor pencil and I scraped over the surface, so it would have a sandy texture, with many different colors. At first glance, it seems rather monochromatic, but as it sucks you in all the colors come out at you like the red-violet, pink hue reflecting off the bank close to the side of the curlew. All the shadows in the sand were originally a blue-violet watercolor pencil and then I did some overdrawing with Naples yellow just to kill it a bit."

Watercolor pencils aren't the only medium he's been experimenting with recently. Sometimes the delicacy of watercolor just isn't enough for what he is trying to express. In *To the Sea*, he painted storks on a hillside with bold contrast between the sunlit portion and the cool, shadowed fore-

ground. Inspired by a watercolor sketch he did when he was in Extremadura, Spain, with the Artists for Nature Foundation, the final image was painted with alkyds, a medium that resembles oils but dries smoother and more quickly, a quality he prefers. "I thought it would help me to relay some of the ideas I had that couldn't be achieved in watercolor because of the color, the vibrancy, and the saturation of color that can be achieved with the alkyd."

In his image of a semipalmated plover pictured on the previous page, Bacon used yet another approach, waterless lithography. For two months he drew the five plates required to print the edition of

twenty-five. Again, the medium appropriately suited the idea he was trying to translate. "With this one, the idea was to conceal the bird without concealing him at all using an illusion called enhanced brightness. In enhanced brightness, the shell in the foreground is actually the same color as everything else but it appears brighter because of the varying contrast around it. The idea being to immediately attract the viewer's attention to the brightest, most predominant element of the composition."

The affect ultimately succeeds because of the sixth and final color Bacon applied. "I used a silkscreen and printed the whole thing with one color, an ivory, to warm everything up and kind of gel the colors that I had already used."

Regardless of the medium he chooses, Bacon approaches each work with a technical precision that captures more attention than he'd like. "All that technique is just my means to an end. My work will always have this fineness. I'm not doing it to grab anyone's attention. I hope that the original idea and the way I portray that idea is the lasting impression as opposed to how I did the reflection in the eye."

As McLean notes, "I don't know much about how he does it and actually, to tell you the truth, I could really care less. I think that all that's important in an artist's work is what he ends up with. And Chris has ended up with some pretty good stuff in the last few years. I've really noticed a big improvement in his work and it's because of this direction he has taken. He's getting to find out who he is. In fact, I would say that he has a pretty good understanding of it right now."

"Chris is in control of what he is doing, and his



Embraced by light, his subjects are part of compositions in which each element, be it a shadow, a twist of wood, or a delicate gully of sand, is there by design.

work looks like his work in the way Ray Ching's looks like Ray Ching's and Bob Kuhn's looks like Bob Kuhn's," McLean suggests. "He's doing some things with design and light and the animal subject that are somewhat ethereal, they're quite jewel-like."

Janet McNaught agrees, "Over the years, Chris's work has become more and more distinctive. I see a very clear voice in his paintings. Even though he's painting nature and natural themes, and painting them very accurately, the concern he has is to say something about painting as well as saying something about birds. He is finding his voice in the use of color and light.

"What distinguishes his work is a composition that is very simple and elegant but sophisticated in its use of light," McNaught goes on to say. "The light source in the painting is always a little bit unusual but the light almost radiates from the surface of the painting."

Ultimately Bacon's art translates feelings and provokes emotion. Each piece benefits by all he has learned from the works that preceded it. His art is controlled but not contrived, subtle and yet persuasive. Embraced by light, his subjects are part of compositions in which each element, be it a shadow, a twist of wood, or a delicate gully of sand, is there by design.

Still, as an image nears completion, it never fails to amaze Bacon how each piece begins to take on a life of its own. "The crane painting has a surreal quality which I found kind of surprising. I had no real intention of it turning out that way. Maybe that's a clue to some new direction," Bacon speculates. "We'll just have to see how it evolves."

McLean, like many, is enjoying watching Bacon evolve. Not one to hand out undeserved praise, he says of Bacon, "I think he is the best young animal painter in Canada. In fact, I'll say this, he is one of the best young animal painters anywhere." Looking at Chris Bacon's body of work, one is compelled to agree.

The only question that remains is what the years ahead hold. About that, no one could be more curious than Bacon himself. "Here I am just thirty-six years old and, all being well, I probably



have another thirty years of painting ahead of me. For the life of me, I just can't imagine what that work is going to look like."

With each new piece, the mystery will undoubtedly unfold and anxious eyes await. □

Rebecca H. Rowland is the editor of *Wildlife Art* magazine.

All artwork is courtesy of Chris Bacon, Burlington, Ontario, Canada.

*Untitled — Long-billed Curlew* (above), watercolor on Arches paper, 16½ x 10¼, 1997, by Chris Bacon