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Art with a
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The New Fauves:
COLOR IN
WILDLIFE ART

The Birds of
CHRIS BACON





FINDING HIS WAY

BY KIM KISER

WHEN CHRIS BACON'S CALLER ID DISPLAYED the phone number for the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, he never suspected Museum Director Kathy Kelsey Foley was calling to tell him he had been named master wildlife artist for the 2004 *Birds in Art* show in Wausau, Wis. "I thought the selection was based on a life's work, and I'm not even half way

through my life's work," says the 43-year-old Bacon. "I didn't know what to say."

What gave the soft-spoken Canadian bird artist pause wasn't so much his surprise at being chosen; it was the thought of having to speak to fellow artists and the public at the Sept. 11 opening of the *Birds in Art* show.

Andean Goose Study,
watercolor/acrylic,
9 1/2 x 9"

*Wild Geese in
Blue-Eyed Grass,
watercolor,
10 1/4 x 10"*

"For the past few years, I've watched these masters get honored. I used to slump in my chair and think, 'My God, there's no way I could get up there,'" says Bacon, whose work has been juried into *Birds in Art* nearly every year since 1987.

Bacon, who admits he gets nervous just meeting people at openings, knew he couldn't let fear stop him. "This is the very highlight of my career as an artist in terms of recognition," he said in a phone interview from the Burlington, Ontario, condominium where he lives and works. "I would have kicked myself the rest of my life if I didn't say, 'Yes.'"

To gain confidence and become comfortable with articulating his thoughts and ideas verbally, rather than with a paintbrush, the self-taught artist enrolled

in a Dale Carnegie course. Three weeks into the training, Bacon sounds at ease as he tells how drawing became a loyal friend when his father's telecommunications job took the family from England to places such as South Africa, Ascension Island, Fiji and Bermuda before settling in Canada.

Bacon explains how at age 18 he convinced the owner of a Burlington gallery to organize an exhibition of his work and watched his collection of 22 bird and animal paintings sell out within minutes. "The show changed my way of thinking," he says. Rather than go to school and study commercial art, Bacon got serious about making art his life's work. He took to heart some constructive criticism from painter Robert Bateman, whom Bacon met at age 16 through





Yellow Legs,
watercolor, 21 x 20"

his art teacher, about doing more research and field-work. "I was smart enough to know that I wouldn't get anywhere doing what had been done," he says. "The only way people would pay attention to my work is if they never saw anything like it before."

Even today, Bacon finds he can't look too closely at the works of wildlife artists he admires—George McLean, J. Fenwick Lansdowne, Ray Harris-Ching and Bruno Liljefors—for fear that their styles might subconsciously creep into his work.

"He's always pushing his own envelope, refining and making even more dramatic a style that was already dramatic," says Foley.

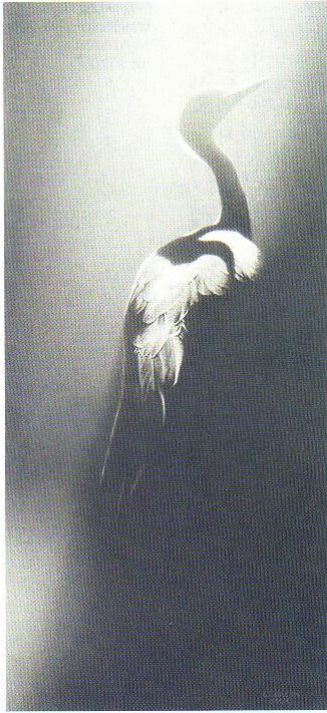
THE DEVIL IN THE DETAIL

Initially, Bacon's goal was to make birds look so real they almost breathed on paper. He worked small (rarely larger than 9-by-12 inches), using a triple-zero sable brush to add detail so fine viewers sometimes needed a magnifying glass to appreciate it.

Today, he describes those early pieces as insanely detailed. "I came to the conclusion that the paintings weren't about detail. I was only painting detail because I couldn't stop," he says. But the obsession with detail eventually did stop Bacon. "I burned out," he recalls. "I realized after a few years of making these paintings of realistic birds that they were just illustrations of birds. There was nothing special about them."

Bacon's pieces started to become less about birds and more about himself. His breakthrough came in 1996, when he spent nine months painting *Sandhill Crane*, a watercolor that hangs in the Woodson Art Museum. Amid the visual cacophony of clouds billowing overhead, grass dancing in the wind and mist rising from the sand, the bird stands on one leg, staring intently at an egg-shaped pebble in the sand.

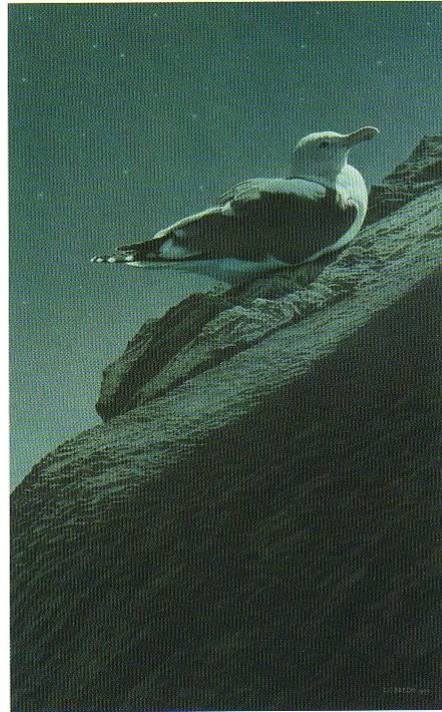
"The painting of the crane is all about finding my way," he says. "It's about trying to ignore all the distractions I face and to realize my vision."



Left to right:
Demoiselle Crane II,
watercolor, 18 x 8 1/2"

*Storm Watch—
Marsh Wren*,
watercolor/acrylic,
21 x 7 1/2"

*Night Light—Lesser
Black-Backed Gull*,
watercolor, 15 x 10"



Bacon, who uses only his own photos, studies and sketches from the field as references, paints birds as he sees them in his mind. "I twist and change and rebuild them," he says. Each work then takes on a life of its own. For example, he might place a flock of white storks on a hillside, where he originally saw sheep, or paint a stonechat on a boulder he conjured from his imagination. "I never paint anything the way I see it; it's always about the way I respond to it," he explains.

As Foley and Bacon were selecting pieces to use in a mini-retrospective of Bacon's work, the museum director listened to the artist's stories about what inspired each painting and how it came together. "There's a passion in the way he tells [his stories] that you see in the work," she says. "I think that's the key to maturity in an artist."

Foley goes on to explain that if you compare one of Bacon's paintings from the early '90s to a work from today, you'll notice a complexity of pose. She describes it as capturing that moment between tossing a ball in the air and watching it come back to earth. "That's the moment he's looking for in bird poses—that moment between movements," she says.

Because he produces only about six paintings a year (he doesn't do commissions), Bacon says each new work must spin off the last one in terms of experimenting with composition, color, the use light

and shadows. For example, he recently used his 2003 watercolor, *Demoiselle Crane II*, a new version of a highly detailed painting he did in 1997, as a way to explore the penumbra. Bacon dramatically cast light on the bird's head and back but obscured its underside and legs in the shadow, allowing the viewer's mind—rather than the artist's hand—to fill in the details.

CRITICAL MASS

For Foley, even talking about Bacon's work makes her smile. "It's like a fine wine," she says. "Not only does it get better with age, but the memory lingers."

She says Bacon's ability to captivate viewers makes his work, seven pieces of which are included in the museum's permanent collection, a consistent crowd-pleaser. "There's a magic there that initially draws someone in," she explains.

But for the introspective artist, pleasing crowds isn't his yardstick for success. The true measure, he says, is being able to create a body of work that satisfies his toughest critic—himself. "Success has nothing to do with money or fame or recognition," he explains. "If I can continue to grow and outdo myself each time I create a painting, if I keep producing better work until the day I keel over, then I will have considered myself successful." **WA**

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