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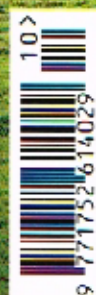
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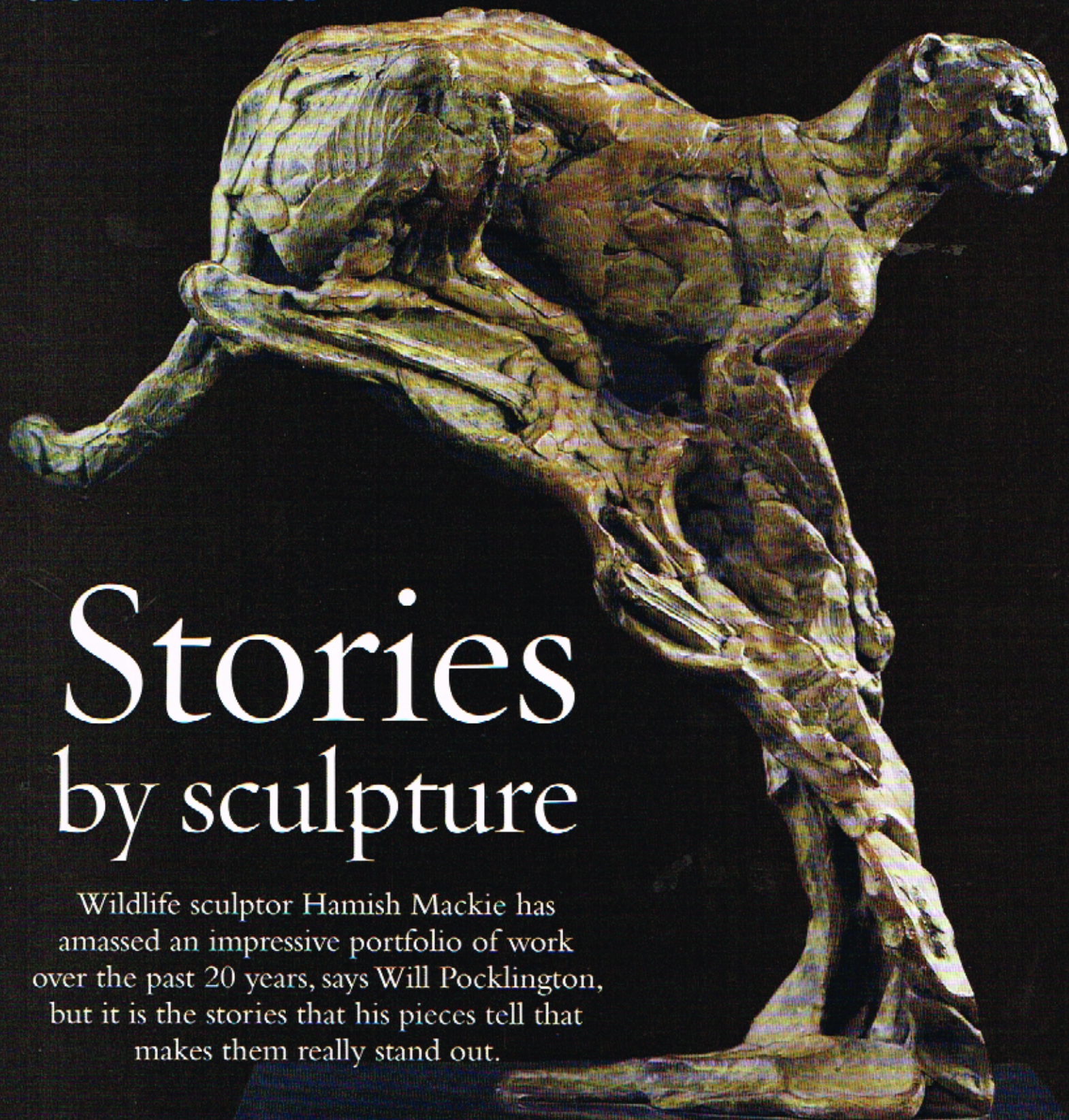
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Stories by sculpture

Wildlife sculptor Hamish Mackie has amassed an impressive portfolio of work over the past 20 years, says Will Pocklington, but it is the stories that his pieces tell that makes them really stand out.



Hamish in his studio

Humans really are quite good at taking things for granted. The food we eat, the services we use, the clothes we wear... the list goes on. Behind most of these exists a lengthy process of design, development, trialling, testing and manufacture. Do we always appreciate it? Of course not.

You might argue that it's a necessary ignorance. After all, our fast-paced way of life allows little time to research the minutiae of all that surrounds us. Dig beneath the surface and even the simplest of things have a surprising amount of thought, time and effort behind them.

For some things, though, overlooking provenance is just not cricket. And art is one of these things. No question.

Surely it's not possible to fully

appreciate a work of art without delving into the story behind it, or at least fully understanding how it came to be? It's a bit like reading only the final chapter of a book and expecting to be engrossed by it, or catching a fresh run sea-licer, with no idea of the incredible journey it has been on.

What really draws us to art is an alluring mixture of journeys, places, experiences and encounters on the artist's part, combined with hefty doses of passion, creativity, hours of graft and meticulous attention to detail. To observe and marvel at a piece of art without contemplating its story is absurd – something I was reminded recently when I met Oxfordshire-based wildlife sculptor Hamish Mackie.

Since going full-time in 1996, Hamish's portfolio has grown to include over 100 sculptures of a range of animals, from dung beetles

and otters, to barn owls and life-size leopards. An exquisite range of subjects, but it's the stories behind each and how these are carried through to the finished piece that is truly jaw-dropping.

He's shot boar in the Ardennes, photographed tigers in India, studied camels in Dubai and travelled to Africa for close encounters with elephant, kudu, buffalo, cheetah, rhino – you name it... Boy has he got some inspiring experiences in the bank.

It all started with an agricultural upbringing in Cornwall – a catapult and stickleback sort of childhood. Dawn till dusk escapades in the fresh air, interrupted only by the bell that his mother would ring when there was food on the table or it was bedtime. "Grandfather was a very keen outdoorsman. He loved his fishing and his shooting, and we'd

spend loads of time on the farm looking at the stock," explains Hamish. "And, subconsciously, I suppose you're always looking at how the animals hold themselves when assessing their health."

It was an interest that stuck with Hamish through his years at



SPORTING ARTIST

a (very outdoorsy) prep school in Dartmoor, before an art course at Radley College really brought his penchant for sculpting to the fore. "I've never been particularly academic, but I had a few good art teachers who clocked onto the fact that sculpting animals was something I was really into," he says. "One of the first pieces I did was of a cockerel's head. We had an aggressive one at home that got the chop. I remember taking his head to school in a pickle jar."

But it was a couple of years after leaving Radley that Hamish received his first commission through the college, a big sculpture of St Peter. "I'd never made figure before, let alone one that people would see publicly," he tells me. It was a bit of a leap of faith, but more importantly, a source of encouragement at a time when a career as a full-time artist was a daunting prospect.

Twenty years later and he's just given the green light for 27,000 eighty-page catalogues to be



printed in time for his upcoming (and aptly named) exhibition, *'Life in Bronze'*.

It's an unsurprising success story, really. Where Hamish excels is in transferring the attitude, movement, disposition and peculiar traits of his subjects to the finished sculpture. To the point where you simply can't resist asking questions about the story behind each one. Go to his exhibition and you'll see what I mean.

"As a subject matter, a wild animal is physically and mentally very different from one in captivity," he tells me. "And it's not just the anatomical details – the tusk length of a four- or five-year-old elephant, for example – but accurately conveying an animal's mentality which is the goal.

"It takes time to get into the right frame of mind for a particular subject, so while I've got one in my head, I might do three

separate sculptures."

This need and desire to get into an animal's psyche is further aided by photographs – a key part of Hamish's work. "We're very lucky today that with modern technology it's so easy to capture images and videos. I can take all sorts of weird shots that you'd struggle to otherwise find – ears, nostrils, how the skin folds on an animal in different places," he admits, as he leans against the heavy metal cabinet housing hundreds of old film cannisters from times past, and flicks through the digital library of images on the screen in front of us.

But whilst images are extremely useful, they're no replacement for real life encounters. "Take a black rhino as an example," he continues. "If you hadn't studied them first-hand, you'd be forgiven for thinking that they are big, cumbersome things. But they can turn on a sixpence and run like a racehorse; this is what I must convey through my sculpture."



On a research trip to The Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya – a place Hamish has grown to love over the years



Inspired by a boar shooting trip to the Ardennes

Happily, Hamish's sporting interests tie in nicely with his art, too. A number of his pieces take inspiration from a fishing or stalking foray, or a scene from a day's shooting. During my visit I examined sculptures of Arctic terns and salmon – ideas born from a fishing adventure with Roxtons on the Kola Peninsula's Varzuga River. They sit alongside red stag bronzes, which were inspired by an encounter with a scruffy switch sounding up hinds during a stalking trip on the West Coast of Scotland, and hares observed closer to home... The stories behind each are as captivating as they are numerous.

"You should be able to look at a wildlife sculpture in the eye and see life," says Hamish, energetically. That much is easy to take for granted when absorbed by the gestural style of his work. It's his journey and his life emanating from the expressive forms of each sculpture, though, which are so difficult to ignore. ➔

THE PROCESS

The actual sculpting process is complex. It starts with what Hamish calls his studio box; a hard-cased mobile studio which tolerates abuse dished out at airports and facilitates the first vital stage of the 'concept to cast' process. Inside is everything needed

to make small-scale models whilst in the field, which can then be upscaled and fine-tuned back in the studio at home.

Plasticine is applied to armatures with articulating joints made from metals and other materials, which can be manipulated and re-positioned as desired.

Of course, the complexity of the armature varies. Hamish's largest commission to date, for example – six larger than life horses – used 1.5km of armature steel, 6.5 tonnes of clay, and 6 tonnes of bronze!

But while the journey begins with ideas, research and the studio box, the realisation of the sculpture itself relies heavily on the symbiotic relationship developed between artist and foundry, something Hamish places great value on.

Enter Simon Allison and his team at the Lockbund Sculpture Foundry in North Oxfordshire, who have now been working with Hamish for nearly 25 years. Between them they have forged an understanding of one another's work – the foundry appreciate the finer nuances of Hamish's art, and he knows their capabilities and trusts they'll do the best job possible. "You sculpt whatever you want and we'll work out a way to cast it," Simon tells him. The results speak for themselves. ➔

"Plasticine is applied to armatures with articulating joints made from metals and other materials, which can be manipulated and re-positioned as desired."



SPORTING ARTIST

LOST WAX BRONZE CASTING

Simon and his team employ the 6,000-year-old 'lost wax' method of casting metal – a highly skilled and labour-intensive process, which allows those at the pinnacle of their trade to preserve the intricate detail of the original clay model.

Step 1: Positive original to negative mould

A silicone rubber mould is made over the original clay, plasticine or wax sculpture. This soft silicone rubber forms an exact negative of the original, and is held in the right shape by a rigid fibreglass outer case. Multi-section moulds fit together with millimetre precision.

Step 2: Negative mould to positive wax

Molten wax is slushed into the mould, poured out and the remaining skin allowed to cool and set; this forms a hollow wax positive approximately 4mm thick. The seam lines where the silicone mould sections fitted together are then worked out and the sculpture is cut up into castable sections. To this a series of wax pipes are fitted (known as sprues); these allow the molten bronze to flow in and the gases to



come out. Each time an edition is cast, another wax has to be made.

Step 3: Positive wax to negative ceramic investment

The 'sprued up' wax is then coated inside and out with liquid ceramic and grit, and built up in layers to form a strong heat-resistant investment. This is then baked upside down in an oven, allowing the wax to be burnt out – hence the term 'Cire Perdue' or 'lost wax'.

Step 4: Negative ceramic investment to positive bronze

The negative space formerly

occupied by the wax is now filled with 1,200°C molten bronze, poured into the pre-heated ceramic investment. Other metals such as silver can be cast using the same method but at different temperatures. When the bronze has cooled, the outer ceramic shell is hammered away and the sprues are cut off. To remove the hard ceramic from the surface detail and deep undercuts, the bronze is placed in acid, which further breaks down the investment.

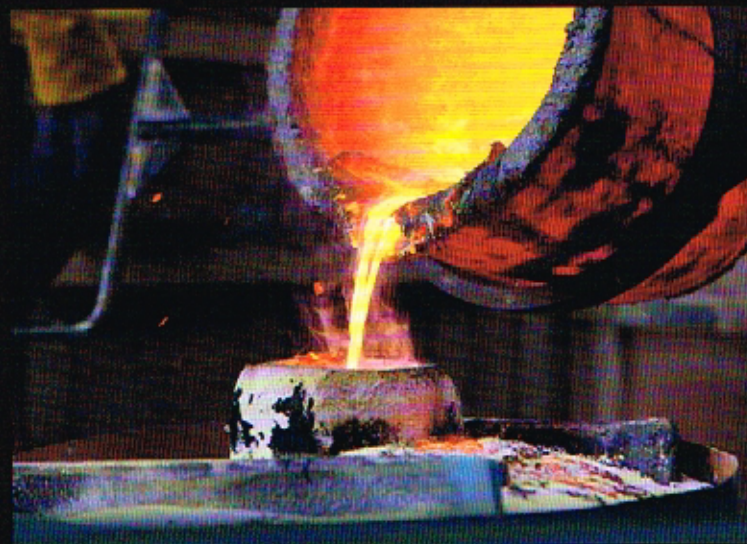
Step 5: Chasing

If the bronze has been cast in several pieces, it is now welded together and chased. This is a highly skilled process recreating any surface detail. The sign of a quality casting is not to notice the chasing. If structurally necessary, sculptures are fitted internally with stainless steel supports.

Step 6: Patinating

The sculpture is now ready to be heated up and applied with a wide range of chemicals, which form the finished patina. Hamish is one of few sculptors who do their own patination, as he considers this to be as important as the colour of paint on a canvas.

“The sign of a quality casting is not to notice the chasing. If structurally necessary, sculptures are fitted internally with stainless steel supports.”



LIFE IN BRONZE 2016

Visit Hamish's exhibition at the Mall Galleries, The Mall, London, SW1, from October 10–22. A portion of the proceeds will go to supporting African wildlife conservation charity Tusk, which Hamish has supported for many years. www.hamishmackie.com