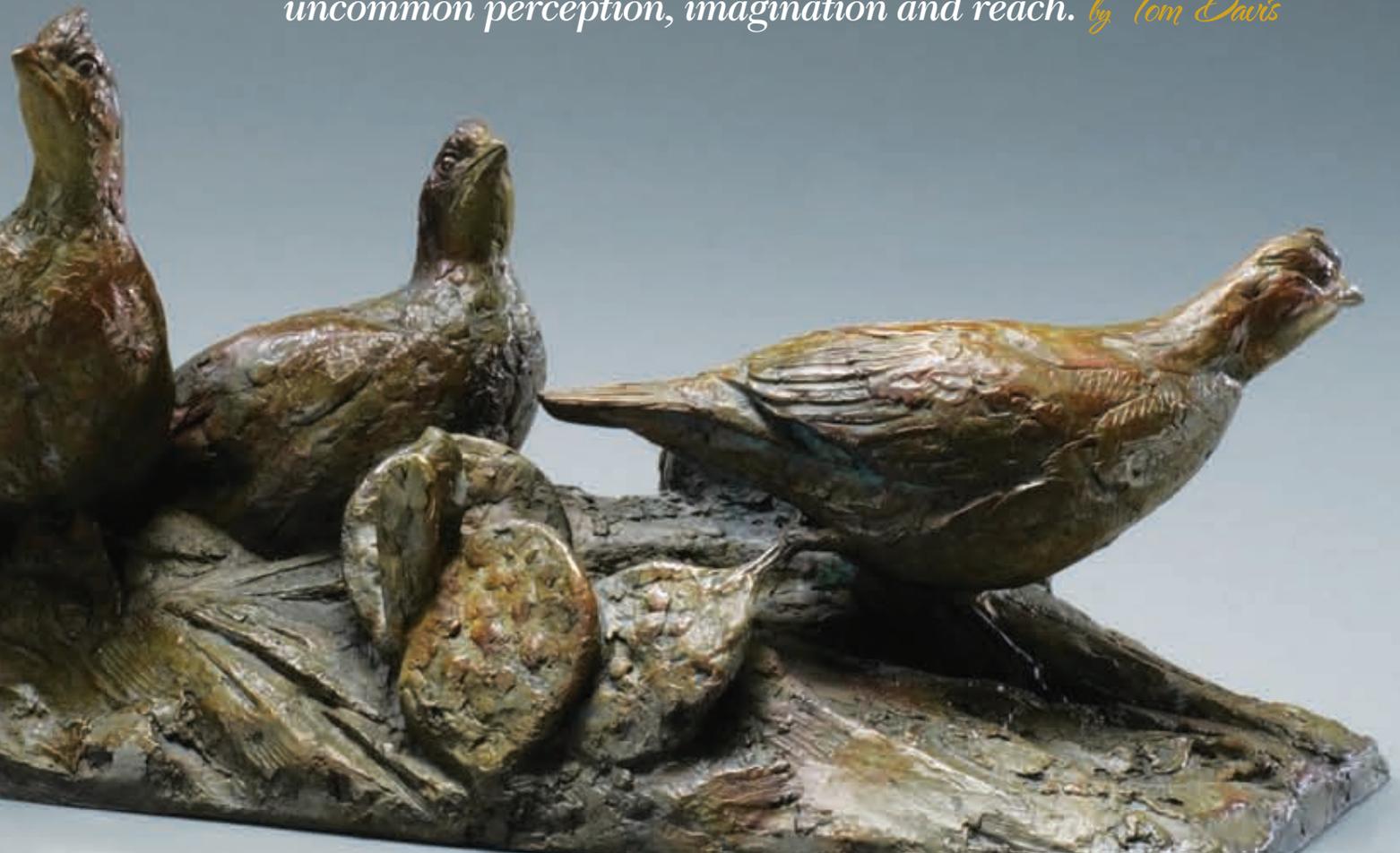




ARTIST'S HANDS, HUNTER'S HEART

Walter Matia has established himself as a sculptor of uncommon perception, imagination and reach. by Tom Davis





COVEY RISE

On a grassy plateau in the shadow of Virginia's Blue Ridge, a pair of pointers stand resolutely on point. They lean into the scent, drinking it in, every sinew stretched tight. Their tails are rigid as pokers; their faces masks of enraptured intensity. But it is a restless quietude: You sense the smoldering energy beneath the still surface, the ferocious engine of desire that drives them. Their strength of character, the blazing force of their spirit, is as densely palpable as a bar of steel.

The tableau is mesmerizing, and without consciously willing it you find yourself holding your breath, as if any sound, any movement would break the spell, shattering the crystalline perfection of the moment. It is as if the earth has stopped spinning, as if the known world's been hushed. Even the rustling leaves fall silent. There is nothing but these dogs, and the reverent light that seems to seek them out. They are eternal, immortal.

At the very least, they will endure far longer than we do. Elements of a sculpture garden that graces a private estate, these dogs, you see, are made of bronze. And it's a measure of the artist, Walter Matia, that he's taken a gesture this visually and emotionally engaging – how often have you heard someone compare a dog on point to a statue? – and found a way to make it even more compelling, to invest it with more resonance, expressiveness and aesthetic dimension.

Merely capturing a likeness is easy; the students in the high school art show have the ability to do that.

Only a very few, however, possess the comprehensive “skill set” that enables them to transcend the obvious, reveal something essential, and make a statement that is highly personal but at the same time taps into something universal, something that hints at larger truths.

Walt Matia is one of these few – and he has the credentials to back it up. A Fellow of the National Sculpture Society, he's twice won the James Earle Fraser Sculpture Award at the Prix de West, the hugely prestigious show at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. Last fall he joined the likes of Thomas Quinn, Ray Harris-Ching, and Lars Jonsson when he was selected as a Master Artist for Birds in

Art, the influential exhibition at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Wisconsin.

This spring, a major show of Matia's work will debut at Collectors Covey Gallery in Dallas and move from there to the Meredith Long Gallery in Houston – a city where Matia is already renowned as the creator of *Spirit of the Bull*, the monumental installation of six larger-than-life Spanish fighting bulls that stand, massively challenging, in the entrance plazas to Reliant Stadium, the home of the Houston Texans of the NFL.

The project took two years, and was so organizationally and logistically complicated – Matia's full-size wax models had to be transported in refrigerated trailers from his studio in Maryland to the foundry in eastern Oregon – and so consuming of Matia's time, attention and creative energy, that he marvels in retrospect that it ever came to

pass. (A book detailing the project, *Spirit of the Bull*, is available through Matia's website, www.matia.com.)

But if the honors, awards and noteworthy commissions make Matia “clearly the pre-eminent outdoor sculptor of the moment,” in the words of Collectors Covey impresario M.F. “Bubba” Wood, what's ultimately more telling – and more gratifying – is the universal esteem he enjoys in the eyes of his peers.

Elliot Offner, past president of the National Sculpture Society and the Andrew W. Mellon professor in the Humanities Emeritus at Smith

College, detects echoes of the 19th century French “Animalier” sculptors in Matia's art, and cites intelligence, a sophisticated sense of design and composition, and what he calls “a labored intensity” as its hallmarks.

Larry Barth, undoubtedly the most honored decorative bird-carver of the past twenty years, uses words like “elegant” and “charismatic” to describe Matia's work.

“It used to be,” muses Barth, “that you'd look at one of his pieces and say ‘That's a nice green heron.’ Now you look at it and say ‘That's a Matia.’”

Probably the most incisive summation, though, comes from painter and sculptor William Reese, a leonine force of nature



THE SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

who's been both a friend and an inspiration to Matia since they met by chance at Jack Dennis' Fly Shop in Jackson Hole in the mid-1980s.

"Walter has no peers as a sculptor of birds in bronze," Reese states. "No one even comes close. A lot of people know birds, but Walter knows birds and he brings art to them."

An aptitude for art (along with abundant opportunities to cultivate it) and a fascination with the natural world have been constants in Matia's life since he was a kid growing up in Cleveland. He took drawing classes at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, and eventually landed a summer job there in the Exhibits Department, doing taxidermy mounts of birds and animals, preparing dioramas, etc. His boss, a talented young taxidermist and budding sculptor named Larry Isard, became Matia's early mentor, and a lifelong friend.

"Larry gave me a lot of practical hand skills," says Matia, "but what he really did was guide my eyes. He trained me to pay attention to 'things whole,' as opposed to focusing on any single aspect, and it's served me very well."

He continued on these parallel tracks, earning a double major in biology and studio art at prestigious Williams College in Massachusetts.

"Williams gave me a good art education," notes Matia, "and a fabulous art history education . . . When you're aware of the artists who came before you – when you know the history of the tradition – you understand how difficult it is to measure up. It's humbling, but it's kept my yardstick pretty well-calibrated. And I think that's also served me well."

The lessons Matia learned beyond the classroom were important, too. He became an avid outdoorsman during his college years, largely through his friendship with a classmate whose father had recently purchased a business up the road in Vermont, a little company that made bamboo fly rods and put out a slender mail order catalog. The classmate's name was Leigh Perkins Jr., though he went by "Perk" so as not to be confused with his dad,

Leigh Sr.; the name of the company was, and is, Orvis.

The really funny thing, says Matia, is that he and Perk (who's now succeeded his father as the company's president) grew up in the same neighborhood in Cleveland, but because they'd gone to different schools they were only passingly acquainted until they found themselves, entirely by accident, living across the hall from one another as college freshmen.

Perk Perkins introduced Matia to grouse hunting ("I think it was three years before I hit one," he laughs) and trout fishing, and as the guest of Perkins *pere* he gunned quail and ducks at Mays Pond Plantation near Thomasville, Georgia – a privilege that he still enjoys.

It was also at Mays Pond, where Leigh Sr. maintains a big kennel of Labs, pointers, setters and Brittanies, that Matia began to take a serious interest in dogs – an interest

that's been fueled by Leigh's regular gifts of puppies and that's expressed itself in some of Matia's strongest sculptures.

And when the elder Perkins committed to making Orvis the first corporate partner of the Nature Conservancy in a deal that Matia played a small role in brokering,

it helped pave the way for an eleven-year-career that Matia recalls as "the best job in the world." He joined TNC in 1976, a year after he'd graduated from college, and by the time he was 28 was the organization's national vice-president for land stewardship.

In case you haven't figured it out already, Walter Matia is a pretty bright guy. Still, in the back of his mind he longed to try his hand at bronzes. The seed had been planted in 1964 when, visiting the Bronx Zoo on a family trip to New York City, he'd seen the Paul J. Rainey Memorial Gateway, the animal-festooned Art Deco arches created by Paul Manship in 1934.

"I remember it like it was yesterday," he says. "That's really what put the desire to do bronze sculptures of animals into my head."



HIGH PLAINS DRIFTERS

Matia cast his first bronzes in 1980. A turning point came in 1985 when his sculpture was accepted for the first time at the Birds in Art show in Wausau. Matia recalls looking around, seeing a roomful of other artists whose work he admired and whose achievements he hoped to emulate, and thinking, “This is what I want to do.”

He took the plunge (a fitting metaphor for the former college swimmer) in 1987, resigning from TNC to devote himself full-time to his art. Success did not come easily – an overnight sensation he wasn’t – but with the unflagging support of people who believed in him, Matia paid his dues, assembled a remarkable body of work, and established himself as a wildlife and sporting sculptor of uncommon perception, imagination and reach.

A typical year will see him do three to four major pieces and perhaps half-a-dozen smaller ones; his studio, which is also his shipping/receiving/warehouse facility and the office of his business entity, Curlew Castings, is located not far from his home amid the wooded hills and rail-fenced pastures twenty-five miles or so northwest of Washington.

Six years ago, at the age of 48, Matia stunned his friends, who’d come to regard him as the paradigmatic confirmed bachelor, by getting married. He and his wife Pam, an OB-GYN, soon collaborated on their own works-of-art, Helen, now 5, and Charlie, 3. Fatherhood, not surprisingly, has cut into Matia’s time spent outdoors, but while he says it’s been so long since he waved a fly rod that he wouldn’t know where in the house to look for one, he still gets in a fair bit of bird hunting, much of it in the company of fellow artist C.D. “Chris” Clarke.

Matia characterizes Clarke, who lives on Chesapeake Bay, as “the best duck hunter I’ve ever seen,” and gives him all the credit for making Molly, Matia’s now-elderly yellow Lab, a dog who in her day was awfully hard to beat.

“I’d leave her with Chris during the duck season,” Matia recalls. “He hunts almost every day, so he’s really the one who trained her. I’d just go down and visit for parents’ weekend.”

Matia’s days spent with dog and gun, from the marshes of the Eastern Shore to the piney woods of south Georgia to the high plains of Montana – where this self-described “streak shooter” once fired a little more than two boxes of shells at a variety of game and missed exactly *twice* – have paid impossible-to-quantify dividends to his art, informing it, enlivening it and imbuing it with a passion it might not otherwise possess. He has the sophisticated understanding of a trained naturalist and the nuanced perspective of a professional conservationist – but at the end of the day, Walter Matia sees with a hunter’s eyes and feels with a hunter’s heart.

“A hunter,” he observes, “knows things that a bird-watcher will never know.”





PROMISE OF SPRING