



Birds
in
Art | 2007

Apotheosis in Bronze

Tom Davis

High Plains Drifters, 2006

Long-billed curlew

Bronze

12 x 17 x 8

Courtesy of

The American Bird Conservancy,
The Plains, Virginia



A cool mist drapes the comely shoulders of Virginia's Blue Ridge, but Walter Matia, his shoes caked in red clay, seems impervious to the chill. Standing in T-shirt and jeans with his hands on his hips, he's overseeing the creation of a sculpture garden devoted to his bronzes – an exercise in artistic midwifery that, like most al measures rewarding and grueling. The setting, on the farm of his great friends Mark and Barbara Fried, is breathtaking; still, it takes a leap of faith to imagine anything beautiful arising from this piece of raw, wounded-looking earth. A few of Matia's pieces are already in place – provisionally, at least – along with the beginnings of gravel walkways, several massive granite boulders, and a newly planted bur oak.

Beyond that, however, and despite the numerous landscapers, carpenters, and laborers bending to their tasks, the prospect is somewhat less than encouraging. Could it be that sculpture gardens, like laws and sausages, are things that you really don't want to see being made?

Undaunted, Matia wades into the thick of this and a hundred other unanswered questions. It's the kind of challenge that gets his juices flowing: a series of linked problems – aesthetic, practical, in some cases a little of both – the solutions to which are by no means obvious, or even, once reached, conclusively preferable to the alternatives. Judgment, in all its subtle shades and fine

distinctions, is required; so are knowledge, intuition, and, yes, conviction. If you want to compare the “process” – a word and an idea that Matia invokes often – to that of taking a sketch doodled on a napkin and, many steps later (not all of them necessarily forward), achieving its fully realized apotheosis in bronze, you’d get no argument.

Observing that last night’s heavy rains nearly sluiced his trio of pintails into the koi pond (speaking of practical problems), a form is hammered together, a bag of SAKRETE® is produced, and *voilà!*, a new, higher base is poured and drying. Matia helps unload several sculptures – great blue herons, sandhill cranes, bird dogs stretched tautly on point – from the back of his Ford van (a vehicle so suspiciously nondescript that it could pass for the property of the Drug Enforcement Administration), and after much trial-and-error he’s satisfied that they’re in places where they’ll “work,” both individually and as elements of the overarching whole. Someone questions the golden hue of the wooden pedestal that supports the bronze of three bulls (a miniature of the monumental installation at Reliant Stadium, *Spirit of the Bull*, that Matia did for the National Football League’s Houston Texans). He responds that the wood is cypress, which in time will weather to a muted gray that complements the natural vegetation and blends harmoniously with the larger design. There is a consultation with the sod guy and constant back-and-forth with the two head gardeners, hyperkinetic David and serene, philosophical Joe, on such topics as the heights, colors, and textures of various plants, how they’ll be arranged and massed, and what effect they’ll have on influencing the eye, visually softening some areas while “bringing up” others.

Spirit of the Bull Maquette

(ed. 10), 2002

Bronze

34 x 83 x 20

Collection of
Fried Farm Sculpture Garden,
Crozet, Virginia





The Promise of Spring

(ed. 24), 2005

Bronze

34 x 38 x 20

Collection of the artist

By quitting time, Matia is dead tired – but happy. “We made some decent progress today,” he acknowledges, twirling a glass of red wine and studying the nascent, but increasingly promising, composition taking shape within the mountains’ lushly contoured frame. “A month from now, this could look pretty good.”

The “art gene” runs in Walter Matia’s family, but being born with talent and inclination is only part of the equation. In the Matia household in Cleveland, the ability to express oneself through art was held to be just as important to a well-rounded education – and therefore just as deserving of cultivation – as the abilities to read, do sums, write clearly, and think critically.

“I am completely un-self-taught,” Matia says. “I had terrific art training from the second grade on. All my life I’ve been surrounded by people who were really good at this stuff – and who, for whatever reasons, were interested in helping me develop what little skill or ability I had.”

A fascination with the natural world – observing, studying, collecting – has been another lifelong constant. One of his first drawing teachers was William Sheely, then director of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History (and, coincidentally, a former classmate at the Cleveland Art Institute of Woodson Art Museum 1979 Master Artist Don Eckelberry). But it was another museum

staffer, taxidermist and sculptor Larry Isard, who would become Matia's early mentor (and, ultimately, one of his closest friends). As a teenager, Matia landed a summer job working for Isard in the museum's Exhibits Department, doing taxidermy mounts of birds and mammals, preparing dioramas, etc. Isard stressed that a solid understanding of animal anatomy and behavior is the crucial prerequisite to capturing gestures that are characteristic and informative, gestures that, in turn, enable you to "build" a successful composition – whether it's a habitat grouping or a bronze.

"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. I'm still trying to grasp the whole story – the masses, planes, and lines; the suggestion of behavior; the mood, emotion, and feeling – trying to be mindful of all these elements in an effort to incorporate them into my work.

"In a sense, you could say I haven't changed jobs since I was seventeen."

By that time, Matia's imagination already had been fired by the possibilities of bronze. In 1964, when he was eleven, his family visited New York City. Their ostensible destination was the World's Fair, but it was the Paul J. Rainey Memorial Gateway at the Bronx Zoo – the fanciful, animal-festooned Art Deco arches sculpted by Paulanship in 1934 – that made the more lasting impression.

"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."

Around the same time that he went to work for Larry Isard, Matia began collecting books. Like the double helix of his DNA, their subject matter reflected his enduring and complementary passions: nature and art. Through his books as well as through exposure to the collections of the museums in Cleveland and elsewhere, Matia became aware of the sculptors whose distinguished lineage he would one day join: Antoine-Louis Barye and the French *Animaliers*; the mercurial and doomed Rembrandt Bugatti; accomplished Americans such as Malvina Hoffman, Anna Hyatt Huntington, and Carl Akeley.

He continued on these parallel tracks, earning a double major in biology and studio art at Williams College in Massachusetts – where, in yet another of the fortuitous, life-changing encounters sprinkled like fairy dust across his *vita*, a lame-duck admissions officer basically gave him a free pass into the class of '75. "I think it was his idea of a parting joke," Matia shrugs.

*Stewardship of the land
is paramount for me.
My inspiration and
motivation to sculpt
are nourished by a
love of nature.*

Intaglio printmaking – etching, in layman’s terms – was Matia’s medium of choice in college. His major professor in art, Thomas Krens, went on to become director of New York City’s Guggenheim Museum. Matia characterizes Krens as “brutal,” but credits him for imparting the valuable wisdom that you should never fall in love with what you’ve done, that your focus should always be on the next piece and how to make it better, stronger, and more incisive.

“Williams gave me a good art education,” says Matia, “and a *fabulous* art history education. The upshot is that it made me sensitive to how difficult this is, how hard it is to get it right. When you’re aware of the artists who came before you, you understand how difficult it is to measure up. It’s humbling, but it’s kept my yardstick pretty well calibrated. And that’s also served me well.”

After graduating from Williams, Matia parlayed his biology degree into an eleven-year career with The Nature Conservancy. Again, he had the good fortune to enter the orbit of a number of remarkably talented people, but he brought plenty to the table himself. In the words of his long-time patron Mark Fried, a businessman and philanthropist who first crossed Matia’s path when he was still with the Conservancy, “Walt’s one of the most broadly knowledgeable people I’ve ever met – but his knowledge is deep, too. That’s a unique combination, in my experience.”

At age twenty-eight, Matia became The Nature Conservancy’s national vice-president for land stewardship. It was important, rewarding work – “The best job in the world,” he calls it – but after casting his first bronzes in 1980, and especially after getting into his first *Birds in Art* exhibition in 1985, he became increasingly restless, increasingly hungry to chase the old dream.

“I have a very distinct memory,” he recalls, “of sitting in the Midway Motor Lodge the first time I was in *Birds in Art*, looking around and seeing people like Steve Kestrel, Jim Morgan, and Leo Osborne, and thinking ‘This is what I want to do.’”

Also circa 1985, he had another “Matia moment.” He was at a fly shop in Jackson Hole that had an art gallery on the second floor, so naturally he went up to look around. A painting of a pileated woodpecker in an apple tree seemed to throw everything else in the room into shadow, and when he’d caught his breath, Matia asked the woman behind the counter who the artist was. She’d barely gotten “Bill Reese” out when she said, “Oh, that’s Bill and his wife coming up the stairs.”

That chance meeting blossomed into an abiding friendship (“It was like meeting an old friend for the first time,” says Reese), and Bill Reese became, in Matia’s

Rising Pintails (ed. 20),
2004
Bronze
78 x 60 x 24

Collection of the artist



When modeling flying birds, what the eye sees and what the mind knows are in delicate balance. Too much detail and the mystery of flight is reduced to a frozen strobe photograph; too little attention to design and the escape from gravity is lost in ponderous engineering. If it works, the impressions are of movement, grace, and wonder.

words, “the person most responsible for where I am today.” He adds, “Bill took an active interest in guiding me. He got me looking at art I never would have looked at, introduced me to people I never would have met, and challenged me to aim at a higher goal. Bill’s the kind of guy who can paint six or seven gorgeous *plein air* pieces during the day, talk about art all night long, then get up early the next morning and do it all again. He’s a force.”

Another longtime source of guidance and inspiration has been Elliot Offner, the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities Emeritus at Smith College, past president of the National Sculpture Society, and the Woodson Art Museum’s 2003 Master Artist. Matia actively sought Offner out after seeing his tensile, highly conceptualized work (“I’ve always been willing to make a pest of myself,” he laughs); the two hit it off immediately and a warm relationship ensued.

“I admired Walter’s art from the outset,” Offner muses, “but felt that it had not yet come to maturity. He was kind of an innocent, really, but he was obviously a very bright, learned young man, and that interested me. A high degree of intelligence is essential if the art is to have deep meaning.

“As Walter’s style grew bolder and more assured, I began to see reflections of the great *Animaliers* – the vigorous motion of Jules Moigniez, for example. An artist’s duty is to rampage through the history of art, find his influences, and transfigure them, and I think Walter has done that. He has attained a mature style; there is a labored intensity in his work between that which reflects the nature of the creature and that which makes a sophisticated composition.

Green-winged Teal

(ed. 50), 2007

Bronze

4 x 12 x 4

Courtesy of
The Conservation Fund,
Arlington, Virginia



That sense of design and composition is often missing in representations of the natural world.”

Matia left The Nature Conservancy in 1987 to devote himself fully to his art, and in the two decades since has amassed an impressive list of awards, honors, and noteworthy commissions. He’s a big, powerfully built man, with hands the size of a first baseman’s mitt and the long muscles of a natural athlete. Keeping up with him is exhausting; he seems to be in perpetual motion, and the number of balls he keeps in the air at any given time is dizzying.

“Walter is a brilliant, brilliant person,” says Bill Reese. “He has no peers as a sculptor of birds in bronze – no one even comes close. A lot of people know birds, but Walter knows birds and he brings art to them. He often laments the fact that he came to sculpture relatively late, but I believe that all the things Walter’s done – working as a taxidermist, his career with The Nature Conservancy – have contributed to his knowledge, experience, and sensitivity as an artist.”

“Walt’s charismatic,” muses Woodson 1991 Master Artist Larry Barth, who’s been an admiring observer of Matia’s work since it first appeared in *Birds in*

The Gleaners (ed. 36),
2006
Green-winged teal
Bronze
17 x 17 x 5
Collection of the artist



Crane Pair, 2005

Whooping crane

Bronze

11 x 9 x 6

Courtesy of

The Nature Conservancy

Arlington, Virginia



Art. “He’s always been good, but as his work has evolved it’s become even more elegant. And as he’s grown more comfortable with the medium, his enthusiasm and personality have come out and given him a recognizable style. It used to be that you’d look at one of his pieces and think ‘That’s a nice green heron’; now you look at it and think ‘That’s a Matia.’”

“One of the qualities in Walt’s work that appeals to me strongly is how he strikes a delicious balance of opposites and has two very different things going on at once. In his large wading birds, for example, he captures their elegance and grace – but at the same time he conveys their gawky ungainliness. That push-pull creates a visual tension that’s compelling.

“What I find most powerful in his work, though, is the way he puts it all together. He has this deft ability to ignore detail and embrace it at the same time.”

Matia’s business persona, Curlew Castings, is located in an appropriately cluttered warehouse space about a ten-minute drive from his home among the wooded hills and rail-fenced pastures of Dickerson, Maryland, twenty-five miles or so north of Washington. The relatively small area reserved for his actual “studio” – the place where a certain percentage of his doodles, sketches, and random scraps of inspiration ultimately become the wax sculptures that serve as the basis for the three or four large pieces and perhaps half-a-dozen



Grouse Fire Screen, 2007

Bronze

40 x 44 x 3 1/2

Collection of the artist

Here I explore lessons and challenges gleaned from Paul Manship and Samuel Yellin. The fire screen is part story, part modeling, and part engineering. It's a project that scratches all my artistic itches.



Molly Is a Working Girl

(ed. 36), 2005

Bronze

23 x 17 x 13

Collection of the artist



My dog sculptures respond to the relationship between hunting dogs and birds. Whether through hearing or sight, a good retriever senses the approach of waterfowl well before the hunter. A shift in a dog's body attitude from contented disinterest to intense concentration is often a duck hunter's first nudge out of a mid-morning, cold-induced slumber in a marsh blind.

smaller ones that he casts in a typical year – reflects the fact that the actual making of art is in some ways the smallest part of making a living as an artist. Matia and his assistant, Leann Krautwurst, invest huge amounts of time and energy on “support services,” including directing the veritable orchestra of people, from shipping clerks to highly skilled foundry artisans, whose contributions are essential when you work in a medium as logistically complicated as bronze.

And that’s to say nothing of Matia’s responsibilities as a member of various non-profit boards, including the American Museum of Fly Fishing and the American Bird Conservancy, or his devotion to fly fishing for trout, waterfowl hunting with his Labrador retrievers (often in the company of fellow Maryland artist C.D. Clarke), the fiction of Ivan Doig and Robertson Davies, and keeping up with his two favorite periodicals, *Natural History* and *The Economist*.

Fortunately, or perhaps inevitably, he’s one of those people able to function on very little sleep, which is a good thing because, as a card-carrying insomniac, he doesn’t get much. This was the case long before Matia, who among his friends had come to personify the term “confirmed bachelor,” became a husband for the first time at age forty-eight and, subsequently, the father of now four-year-old Helen and two-year-old Charlie. His wife, Pam, is an obstetrician-gynecologist, and in the manner of most artist’s spouses, she keeps his head out of the clouds and his size thirteens planted squarely on *terra firma*. When Matia called to tell her he’d been named the Woodson Art Museum’s 2007 Master Artist, her approximate response was, “That’s wonderful – but did the Master remember to put out the recyclables?”

For his part, Matia says he is “incredibly flattered” by the Master Wildlife Artist designation. “When I look at the ranks I’m joining,” he notes, “it’s pretty astounding. Lars Jonsson is an extraordinary talent, Larry Barth is otherworldly. The Master Artists are people who’ve lasted, people whose art always has something to say.”

Given tongue by the perception, imagination, and sensitivity of their creator, Walter Matia’s sculptures speak, through the medium of bronze, in a language both ancient and eloquent.

Tom Davis has written extensively on wildlife and sporting art for more than twenty years, and in 2001 served as a *Birds in Art* juror. His many books include *Why Puppies Do That*, *The Orvis Book of Dogs*, and *The Tattered Autumn Sky*. Davis lives in Green Bay, Wisconsin – and is, like Walter Matia, a graduate of Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts.



Three Wild Turkeys (ed. 7),
2002

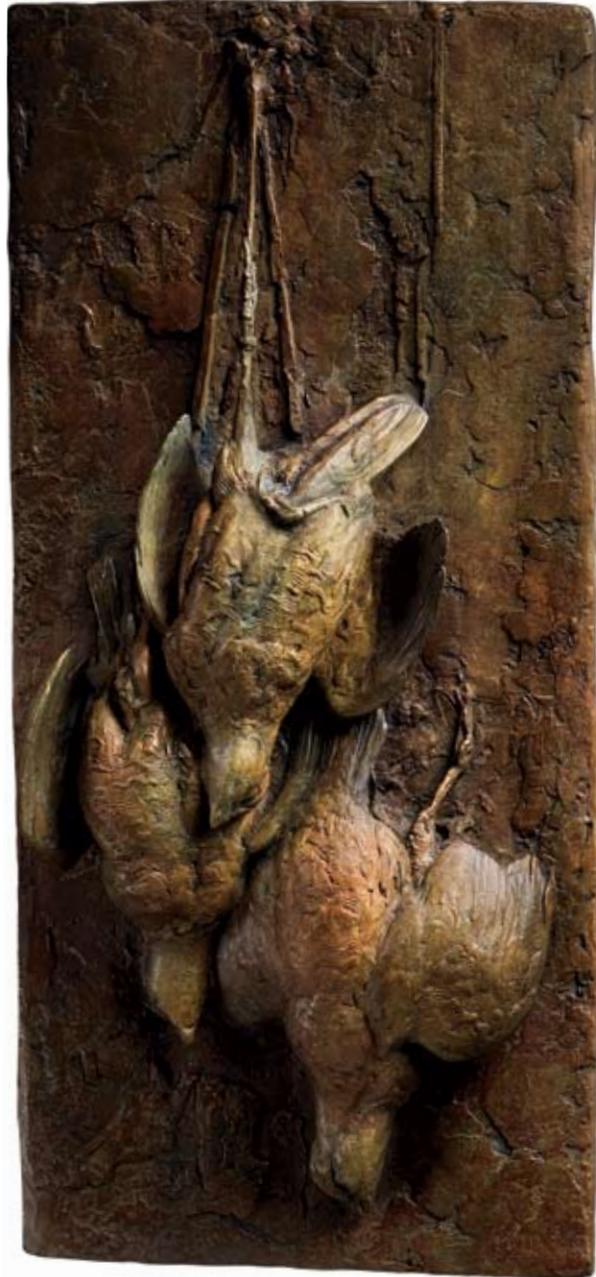
Bronze
55 x 72 x 24

Collection of the Woodson
Art Museum, gift of John A.
Slayton and family in loving
memory of Elizabeth D. Slayton

BORN: 1953, United States
RESIDES: Dickerson, Maryland
EDUCATION: B.A., Williams College,
Williamstown, Massachusetts
EXHIBITIONS: *Wildlife Art for a New Century
II*, 2005, National Museum of Wildlife
Art, Jackson, Wyoming; *American Birds:
A Flight Through Time*, 2005, The Wildlife
Experience, Parker, Colorado; *National
Sculpture Society*, 2007, Park Avenue Atrium,
New York City; *Prix de West Invitational*, 2007,
National Cowboy and Western Heritage
Museum, Oklahoma City; *Fellows Invitational*,
2007, Park Avenue Atrium; *Paws & Reflect:
Art of Canines*, 2007, Ella Carothers Dunnegan
Gallery of Art, Bolivar, Missouri
AWARDS: Bronze Medal and Pietro and
Alfrieda Montana Memorial Prize, 2005,
National Sculpture Society; Award of Excel-
lence, 2005, *Art and the Animal*, Nevada State
Museum, Carson City; Leonard J. Meiselman
Memorial Award, 2006, *Art and the Animal*,
Bennington Center for the Arts, Bennington,
Vermont; James Earle Fraser Sculpture Award,
2006, *Prix de West Invitational*; Kenneth T. and
Eileen L. Norris Foundation Award, 2007,
Masters of the American West, Autry National
Center, Los Angeles

COLLECTIONS: Benson Sculpture Park,
Loveland, Colorado; Brookgreen Gardens,
Murrells Inlet, South Carolina; Cleveland
Museum of Natural History; Gilcrease
Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma; National Museum
of Wildlife Art; Southern Alleghenies Museum
of Art, Loretto, Pennsylvania; Wendell Gilley
Museum, Southwest Harbor, Maine; Woodson
Art Museum, Wausau, Wisconsin
BIBLIOGRAPHY: "Abbett on Art," *Sporting
Classics*, March/April 2006; "Grapevine: Walter
T. Matia," *Wildscape*, June 2007
REPRESENTATIVES: Audubon Gallery,
Charleston, South Carolina; Collectors Covey,
Dallas; Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, New
Mexico; Meredith Long & Company, Houston;
Russell A. Fink Gallery, Lorton, Virginia

Birds in Art: 1985-86, 1988-91, 1993-94,
1997-06



Quail Relief (ed. 48), 2007

Bronze

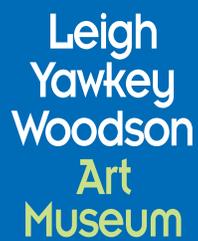
20 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 4

Collection of the artist

A still life offers different artistic opportunities than life modeling. Freed from a need to capture a gesture, the sculptor can concentrate on form, masses, and implied weight. The abstract composition is paramount; the story subordinate.

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