

## A CONVERSATION WITH DUTRA:

WHILE HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS ARE FAMILIAR WITH HIS *OTHER* WORK IN HOLLYWOOD, THIS CALIFORNIA WILDLIFE PAINTER CRAFTS A DIFFERENT BOLD VISION BEHIND THE EASEL.

Trust us: You already know Randal M. Dutra's work. It's part of the communal social tradition called going to the movies. As an animator, Dutra has worked as a creative collaborator on special effects teams that produced some of Hollywood's biggest blockbusters. Ever heard of the films "Star Wars: Return of the Jedi", "Jurassic Park II: The Lost World", the remake of "War of the Worlds", "Gremlins", "Robocop", "Willow", "The Nightmare Before Christmas", and "101 Dalmatians"? For two of those, he was nominated for an Academy Award.

Yet for the past three decades, Dutra, who makes his home in northern California, has never abandoned his *first* passion: painting landscapes and animal scenes with an old school technique. Prior to making a fateful professional detour toward the big screen, Dutra spent a decade learning from masters of plein air painting and animal art – mentors such as the late Robert Loughheed of Santa Fe and Bob Kuhn of Tucson, sculptor George Carlson, and Clarence Tillenius of Winnipeg who was one of the last old school scientific expedition painters in Canada. Dutra has a distinctive palette and is known for his unconventional designs. He is a regular participant at the annual Prix de West Invitational in Oklahoma City, the Western Visions Show at the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson Hole and the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum's Birds In Art show. He has been recognized by the Society of Animal Artists. He is represented by Astoria Fine Art in Jackson Hole, Pitzer's Fine Art in Wimberly, Texas, and Tierney Fine Art in Bozeman, Montana. Not long ago, he joined friend and fellow painter Ralph Oberg on a research trip into the Canadian Rockies following the trails once blazed by Carl Rungius. Besides Dutra's work, above, additional pieces can be viewed at his website: [www.randaldutra.com](http://www.randaldutra.com). Wildlife Art Journal recently caught up with Dutra and had the following conversation.

**WILDLIFE ART JOURNAL / TODD WILKINSON:** Your acumen for painting exerted itself while you were still in high school. And you tell young people that there's no shortcut around paying one's dues.

**RANDY DUTRA:** While I was in 10th grade, I began working from life from both the human figure and animal. Over the next nine years (summers and falls) I would study and observe animals and their behaviors first-hand at the Okanagan Game Farm in British Columbia with Clarence Tillenius who was well known for his work in the Arctic and the boreal regions of Canada.

**WILKINSON:** Lougheed too was present at Okanagan and for him, figure drawing didn't involve just humans. He believed that any living, breathing creature was a suitable subject. You've said in the past that Lougheed also believed students need to receive training in studio instruction, becoming familiar with painting methods, and knowing who and what came before them.

**DUTRA:** I drew, painted, and sculpted from life all forms of wildlife in both summer and fall sessions held at an art school in Okanagan. Upon graduation from high school in 1977, I enrolled at the Art Students League in Manhattan, [New York City] to study figure drawing and sculpture. When I returned, I was invited by Bob Lougheed to study painting with him at his home in Santa Fe. After that, I spent another three years working in a fine art bronze foundry learning the ancient trade from the ground up. While there I cast my own sculptures, which I was selling. Later, it was my good fortune to meet and learn from George Carlson, who had studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and won national praise for his series of pieces that explored the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico.

**WILKINSON:** Over the years, in several interviews we've done, you've been reticent and very private in talking about your career as an animator in Hollywood. We remember hearing your name announced on TV as a nominee for the special effects in "War of the Worlds". The fact is that all artists are the sum of their experiences. Not mentioning your work with people like George Lucas and Steven Spielberg would be an omission of the things that make you a painter with your own distinctive approach to color and design. So we're not going to let you dodge the question: How did you get into animation, how has it influenced your painting, and when you are involved in a media endeavor aimed at achieving high visual impact on the big screen, what are the connotations for trying to engage viewers who see your work between the frame?

**DUTRA:** In 1981, I was approached by an acquaintance who was head of the mold department in the Creature Shop at ILM. Because I was an artist and well versed in tools, materials, and hands-on skills fresh from my foundry experience, I was hired immediately to begin work on "Star Wars: Return of the Jedi" which was already in full-swing of production. Little did I realize at the time what the future would hold for me in the film industry. As I've said, this wasn't by design but came as an opportunity of contacts I had made, and I had had a great interest in visual effects work since childhood. So I eventually jumped in, but as a part of an agreement I kept some summer and fall months free to attend the Game Farm sessions in Okanagan and continue my studies.

**WILKINSON:** So even during this exciting period, you never abandoned your dream of making a career as a wildlife artist?

**DUTRA:** Ironically, it was my fine art training that opened this other door. I had been so involved with my fine art activities and studies that I was reluctant to break away from them,

even though the acquaintance who knew my work had been after me for about six months before I agreed to meet him at the Creature Shop at ILM. In fact, one of the reasons I had to put it off was a trip to Sweden along with fellow painter Dwayne Harty to study Bruno Liljefors originals with Clarence Tillenius. Clarence, who is of Swedish ancestry, was one of the few at the time who realized Liljefors' genius and had studied the work of Anders Zorn but Liljefors had been lesser known to artists in North America. It was a fantastic trip full of discoveries that inspire me to this day. When I returned, I gave my ILM friend a call and the rest is history.

**WILKINSON:** How has your work in animation affected your approach to painting?

**DUTRA:** I have always been a keen student of action and movement. It fascinates me – the structure, the variety, the anatomical features that allow for certain actions, different kinds of locomotion such as flying, swimming, walking, crawling, etc. In time, that evolved into integrating behavior and performance considerations into my animation. Movement reveals a lot about an animal or person; it is inseparable from their character. The process of observing, studying, and breaking down the micro-moves found in humans and animals in motion is a discipline that pays many dividends.

**WILKINSON:** Who were your influences in animation?

**DUTRA:** When I was about eight years old, I discovered Ray Harryhausen's great 3-D stop-motion animation for live-action feature films, and that began my interest in animation as an art form. The movie that did it was "The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad".

Animation is a unique art that reveals itself only through the passage of time, because it is *movement* based. To give an inanimate object a living presence and character calls upon a great amount of creativity, imagination, patience, and observation. Ray Harryhausen is the acknowledged master, along with the earlier Willis O'Brien [creator of the 1933 film "King Kong"]. He was a primary influence on George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, James Cameron and all the "heavies" in the film business who bring to life creatures and fantastic beings that we have never seen before – except in darkened theaters around the world.

**WILKINSON:** Is there a possibility that instead of being a painter, you could have become a filmmaker?

**DUTRA:** I always felt compelled to paint and sculpt. The study of motion brought me into the realm of fine arts in that I made my own small 8mm films and studies of animals and humans. I had to draw, sculpt and paint to be able to realize these dream creatures and animals in a realistic, tangible form. The animal world – or, in a larger sense, the natural world – in the end would be where I would concentrate my efforts as I have always had an abiding affinity and love for things wild.

**WILKINSON:** What was your path after you were hired by Lucas?

**DUTRA:** I began as a mold maker, then graduated on to key sculptor, creature designer, animator, consultant, and lastly as an animation director for Steven Spielberg. I'd have as many as 30 animators under my direction at one time, constantly contending with impossible deadlines (are there any others?), working on prominent films, and having the honor of being twice nominated by my peers for an Academy Award. In many ways every day was a baptism by fire. But you learn responsibility, discipline, organizational and scheduling skills, stamina, and the joys of steering a team of talented folk towards achieving a common goal. I wouldn't trade these rare experiences for anything, and even taking into account all of my in-depth art studies, the classroom or laboratory of the "film experience" was as expanding and influential as any of my fine art investments. I have no doubt that I am a much better artist because of it – and I could not have attained these particular skills any other way, and for that I am grateful.

**WILKINSON:** How do the two professions inter-relate today?

**DUTRA:** When you are designing a shot through the camera lens, you are composing. Now take that same scenario, but this time with a *moving* camera. What you have now is a series of compositions, one dissolving seamlessly into the next. I have learned more about composition and design from movie work than all my "fine art" studies combined.

Was this career by design? No. Was it the right, or "proper", way to go? Who knows? For me it was merely being presented with new paths and following them. I can't imagine producing the work I am now without having those unique experiences under my belt. I think "life" is taking the opportunities that present themselves at any particular time. Others may look at someone's career and try to connect the dots making some "sequential sense" out of it – as if it were orchestrated. But I can't take any credit for that. Things just happened, I was prepared, and I was there to pour myself into it, to commit to it. That's the beauty of working from a creative passion. The mediums may change and they often do but the passion that drives one is multi-faceted and constant.

**WILKINSON:** You've said in the past that a sense of connection exists between artists who are driven to paint and sculpt and the hard-driving individual involved with cinematography, that you create grand visions out of the ether. Could you elaborate?

**DUTRA:** I've met a lot of people who are, by their nature, adventurers and seekers who have had similar journeys. We immediately have a commonality to enjoy – a kinship of curiosity and love for travel. It seems a bit odd, even presumptuous, that some people think that an artist must be conceived exclusively of a "fine art" background. In fact, very few are. Without fail, most all of the accomplished fine artists we know come from varied commercial backgrounds – that is

where they cut their teeth. And they have often spoke of how valuable that time was in their development. By happenstance, I fell into a very public, worldwide distribution aspect of it.

The movie experience has only enhanced and strengthened my ability to put the pictures or sculptures in my head on the canvas or in clay. We all are a product of many influences, many knowledges – so what's not to celebrate in that?

I am always tickled to hear that an artist friend is also, for example, an accomplished jazz pianist, a plastic surgeon, archeologist, or has their pilot's license. I admire those who dare to be "hyphenates"; individuals who are actively involved in other interests that can inform and enrich a primary passion. So many people choose to work in a comfort zone, but when one is called upon to stretch, that is when a unique type of growth can begin.

**WILKINSON:** You don't think of yourself as an 'animal artist' but as a painter who is drawn to animals as subject matter.

**DUTRA:** The quality of one's work is what prevails ultimately. In the end – in whatever medium, be it film, painting, writing or sculpture – that is what matters. People purchase my work because they appreciate animal art, but also – and this is the wonderful thing – people who have never bought a 'wildlife' piece for their collection have purchased my work simply because they fell in love with a painting, a work of original art regardless of subject matter. And that's a great feeling.

**WILKINSON:** You've had the fortune to learn from remarkable people.

**DUTRA:** The great teachers/mentors I have studied with are very distinct personalities unto themselves. Sometimes the only thing they had in common was that they were artists. Some were rascals, some were gentlemen, the best ones were a fascinating mix of the two – but *all* were interesting. And I must admit that the rascals offered just as much as the conservatives, often they could be more colorful, more daring and inspiring. A lot of it had to do with their working philosophies. When you study with someone, you are really observing how they deal with, and view, life. So not only are you getting a solid art education, but concurrently you are getting some life lessons and developing as a human being.

I should point out that there are some "teachers" who love to live in the realm of rarified atmospheres – they love that "pose". Their thoughts are too deep, too esoteric to articulate to another. Pretty much without fail, the teaching geniuses I know can articulate extremely complicated concepts. It may take them a while to find the words, but they do.

**WILKINSON:** Still, all of us know of students who are able to afford the best instruction money can buy yet they fail to achieve their potential?

**DUTRA:** Natural ability and instinct are only half as powerful without discipline. To me, the

best teachers are the ones who do not necessarily teach purely technique, no matter how intoxicating it may be, but rather impart the necessary aspects of independence, self-reliance, originality, and the ability to *solve problems*. The most accomplished artists I know are the greatest problem solvers. And that's true in life, too. They don't repeat themselves, which is why they are often frustrated, but wholly engaged. It took me a while to figure out that being frustrated on some level was not a sign of weakness or inability, but rather evidence of a searching spirit that is constantly coming upon new, unsolved problems. The great artists are *always* walking the thin line between confidence and humility – because their greatness is in knowing *what is possible*. And at the same time, trying to *attain* those possibilities.

**WILKINSON:** How does one find a mentor?

**DUTRA:** What we desperately need when we are young is exposure to a great many things and to find a way to digest the experiences that best fits our person. A good teacher is able to expose us to new things and present information in an engaging, personal way.

I found the best way to acquire the experience is to go to the source. Seek out those working professionals whose work "speaks to you". Respectfully ask for an audience with them, show them that you are serious, and gratefully accept a critique gleaned from their years of experience.

Then shut up and listen like you never have before. The difference between "hearing" and "listening" is the difference between "looking" and "seeing". If someone older than myself is willing to take the time to make some observations on my work and share their great experience, passion, and knowledge with me – then the least I can do is possess my soul in patience, get out of the way, and listen. I may not like all that I hear, but praise isn't the reason I'm there. It's a fact that we learn much more from constructive criticism than any kind of praise.

**WILKINSON:** Asking an artist about technique is, of course, something that is unconscious and ineffable. But how would you describe the way you approach the surface once a painting moves from sketch to easel?

**DUTRA:** For me, it involves *craftsmanship*, or the time spent in lovingly building up textures, subtle color harmonies, interesting compositions and designs. These are the things that are becoming harder and harder to find in painting. Some artists are in such a hurry that they are actually neglecting their subjects' possibilities and potentials and as a result can shortchange the finished product.

**WILKINSON:** Run with that thought...

**DUTRA:** Well, I can't speak for others but for me it's about continually trying to *refine* my work, to keep it at some level of discovery, of engagement. When I say "refine" it isn't about detail. It's about how everything within the frame should work together to build towards and

support your main theme – and that could be anything from leaving a passage of your canvas just *stained* with thinned paint, or slowing down and tightening up for a particularly descriptive passage. A canvas should be a *considered* work, but not in a way that stifles spontaneity, or the creative recognition of usable accidents. There should be some inventiveness that surfaces. Of course we can't always hit the ball out of the park with every piece; that's impossible. Ironically, some of the pieces I feel may be my best to date or reflecting of personal growth may not be the pieces that immediately find an appreciative audience. But if there is a consistency of quality and uniqueness about the work, I've seen that people will eventually come around and catch up to it.

But it takes time. It's not a sprint, it's a marathon.

**WILKINSON:** As a genre, wildlife art is built upon the tradition of Realism, meaning animal forms that are recognizable to the human eye and perhaps subconsciously archetypal. Where do you see your work fitting into the progression?

**DUTRA:** There are generally two ways to go: Hang on the coattails of established artists and their accomplishments and try to assume their "mantle" which of course one can never capture in an already plowed furrow, or you can venture forth with your own voice, your own identity. Obviously, the advantage to the former is you produce artwork that has already been proven financially on a commercial level, has already been accepted in the marketplace, and all the aesthetic problems are solved for you by someone else. The obvious disadvantage is that it stunts your potential as an artist, and you'll never be seen over the long-term as an innovator or your own person because it is built on a false foundation.

But more to the point, with *so* many ways to go, so many possibilities to explore – why on earth would you *want* to be somebody else? That person has already inhabited and graced this earth with their talent and gifts. That stature was hard-earned, specific, and cannot be replicated by another no matter how relentless the hype or self-marketing promotion.

**WILKINSON:** Any final thoughts for those young aspiring painters out there?

**DUTRA:** Tillerius used to tell me, "Respect what has gone before – study and digest it – but don't be ruled by it". In other words, use it as a point of departure, a point of stimulation. Study long and hard, then naturally arrive at your own techniques, your own signature. It's a lot harder and not without its frustrations, but it is also much more rewarding.

I am, and will always be a student of art, and more often than not, I'm not looking at the accepted convention of "wildlife art" for inspiration. I'm just looking at great *art* and getting outdoors for my field work as much as possible. It all starts there for me.