

MICK DOELLINGER



Whoa, bronze, 13"H by 16"L by 9.5"W

"I've captured this pointer as he's just run past a covey of quail and caught their scent, turning back hard at the last moment, as you can see by the direction of the ears and the roll of his eyes."

A WORK IN PROGRESS

By Mary Nelson

Art and animals—the two are inseparable as far as sculptor Mick Doellinger is concerned. Although art and animals have always been his destiny, his path to career artist was anything but conventional. In fact, it's the stuff legends are made of.

Doellinger's first brush with art came about when he was a young boy in Australia. He was just 11 when he met the mythical sculptor William Ricketts, who had purchased a cottage near Melbourne and was sculpting a tribute to the aboriginal culture he had lived amid for 14 years. When young Doellinger stumbled upon his cabin and kiln, Ricketts handed over some modeling tips, a bit of encouragement, and a block of clay. Once the boy had sculpted a couple of clay pieces, his fate was sealed.

Throughout his youth and early adulthood, animals were Doellinger's avocation and vocation. "My earliest memories were of being crazy about animals—their feel, smell, mannerisms, and build— everything about them I found



Excel, bronze, 32 ½"H by 51"L by 24"W

"I was commissioned to create this piece for an international marketing company. It stands in the lobby of the company's headquarters to remind associates of their commitment to excellence."

so exciting," he says. "I drove adults around me nuts with my obsession." As he got older, a passion for larger animals replaced his interest in the less intimidating snakes, lizards, rabbits, and guinea pigs. Doellinger turned his attention to horses and, by the time he was 10, owned his own steed.

Despite his rabid interest, a career as an animal artist didn't seem to be in the cards, especially in Australia. Even though the country is about the size of the lower 48 United States, its population is 21 million; fewer people than in Texas, where Doellinger now lives and works. It wasn't exactly a hothouse for budding artists to sell their creations.

Being an enterprising lad, Doellinger did the next best thing; he worked at jobs that involved animals. When he was just 15, he became an apprentice to a butcher and also met a young fellow who introduced him to the thrills of the rodeo. Although he'll tell you his skills were less than stellar, Doellinger followed the

rodeo circuit for 14 years. He initially rode bulls and bareback broncs and at age 18 was steer wrestling. A trip to California in 1979, however, set young Doellinger on another path.

By this time, his interest had expanded to include large game animals and, while he was competing in California rodeos, Doellinger met a couple of taxidermists. They introduced him to what would become the predecessor to his current art form, and Doellinger spent the better part of a year in California studying taxidermy and learning to build forms of the wild animals that enchanted him.

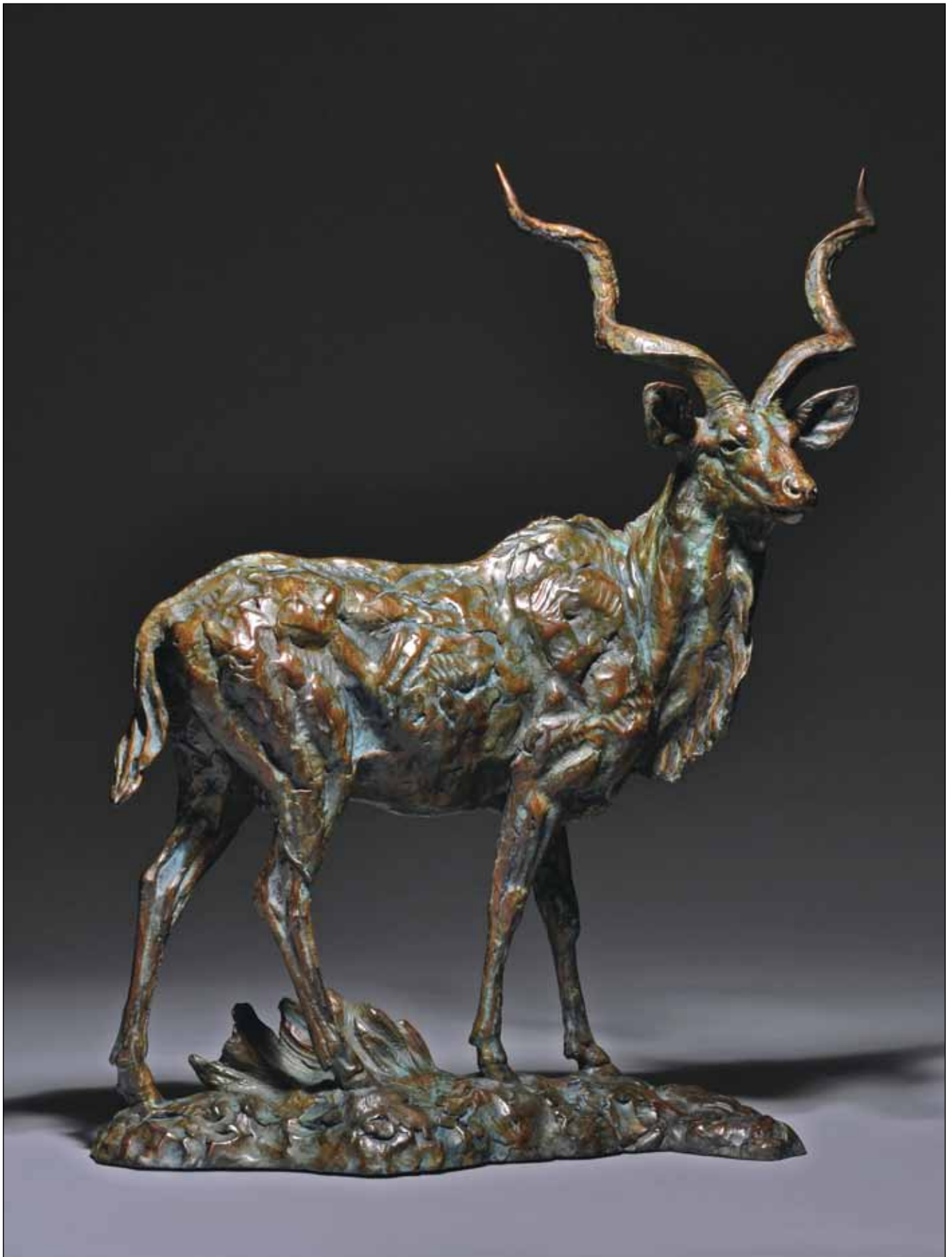
Upon returning to Australia, he began to work as a hunting guide in the outback, while he set up a taxidermy business, which was not an easy task. Unless Doellinger ordered all his taxidermy supplies from the United States, he had, in his word, "zilch."

"Back in the '80s when I started my business, there were no taxidermy supply companies in Australia," he

recalls. "I had to sculpt many of the forms (manikins) I used." The process, he'll tell you, was trial and error and more than a little frustrating. Because his interest in taxidermy was so keen, however, Doellinger persevered. First, he'd wire together entire skeletons, which demanded an in-depth knowledge of the anatomy of the animal. That is where his lifelong interactions with animals in every one of his jobs gave him a leg up. Using measurements of the animal, reference castings, and photos as aids, he sculpted the animal in modeling clay, laying it over the wire frame. Afterward, he'd make a fiberglass mold and pour polyurethane into it to replicate the animal he was working with.

"As you can imagine, this final form had to be very accurate, because the animal's skin would have to fit over it," he explains. "Taxidermy sculpting kind of led me into the bronze sculpting I do today."

Where many fine artists attend art schools to learn composition and



In the Shadows, bronze, 26"H by 21"L by 10"W

"To me a Kudu bull is the most elegant of all the African antelope. With their long spiral horns and slender bodies and limbs, they seem to almost lack gravity. For such a large animal, they really seem to disappear into the shadows of the bush and then reappear, motionless almost like a mirage."



Hard Country for Old Men, bronze, 23"H by 17.5L by 11"W

"I'm hoping viewers of this piece can imagine what this animal's home range must look like, based on his condition. This desert bighorn ram's physical characteristics are a direct result of the harsh environment he lives in; a small, hard, lean body, exaggerated by big horns."

design theory, Doellinger's training came firsthand—literally. "All my experiences and other jobs have given me a knowledge and insight into animals that would have been very difficult to simply learn from a text book," he says. "To be able to handle the horns and antlers and the skins of such magnificent animals from across the globe and have the ability to rebuild and reconstruct them fascinated me."

Although the more scientific sculpting involved with taxidermy was interesting to Doellinger, he was far more excited about creating fine art. But, again, the lack of supplies, materials, and demand for fine art sculptures in Australia seemed to railroad his career. The expense of the materials and the lack of



foundries plagued him. In 2003, he decided it was time to pack up his dreams and move to the United States, where he settled in Texas and worked part-time for a wholesale taxidermy outfit, while he continued to sculpt.

It didn't take long for collectors to become interested in Doellinger's art, and his career began to flourish. "Being in the United States has given me so much access to so many animals, including many exotic species from around the world," he says. "As an animal lover, I cannot imagine a place that would suit me better from a personal or business standpoint." As his sculptures gained popularity, Doellinger dreamed of focusing his energy on fine art.

By 2006, he was sculpting full

time. "I'm inspired by animals of all kinds and transferring those passions, and life experiences into the creation of bronze animals was the perfect path for me," Doellinger says. "It's more than a job; it's the lifestyle of being able to constantly learn about my subjects, be in nature, and to create art that I hope will inspire other people to enjoy the animals I sculpt."

Doellinger's sculptures are more than mere depictions of animals; they embody the essence, and the personality, of each creature. So, while he describes his work as representational, his attunement with the animals he sculpts takes it so much deeper. "When I'm sculpting, I get into the character of the animal," he explains. "It's like being a child, playing and pretending to be a horse or tiger. I get into the psyche of the animal, and I can imagine and feel how it is feeling and moving, and that's where [the personality] comes from."

Doellinger hopes that his sculptures make people more aware of animals. He talks about taking a trip to Yellowstone and being amazed at the number of people who go there in hopes of catching a glimpse of a bear, elk, or buffalo. "In the excitement of photographing the creature, people may not see the animal fully," he says. "Yet they



Totem, bronze, 16"H by 9"L by 8"W

The Getaway-Monument, bronze, 75" H by 75" L

"This is a whitetail buck that has been spooked hard. As you can see, his tail is tucked under, and he's getting into the ground for power and traction."

"In native beliefs, a totem animal is associated with a tribe, family, or individual, because of a particular connection. The Plains Indians' lives were so dependent on the bison that I thought this a fitting title."





Full of Himself, bronze, 21"H by 26"L by 9"W

"With this piece, I wanted to portray a stallion in his prime, full of power, vigor, and testosterone. I could imagine at any moment he would start squealing and pawing at the ground."


may look at one of my sculptures and start to notice a lot more about the animal's shape and anatomy, because they're not distracted by the color, movement, environment, or situation they are in."

The mere sight of an animal can kick-start Doellinger's creative juices, but he generally ruminates for a while before the perfect composition or pose emerges. For example, he says, a steer is large and heavy and has a lot of gravity, while a kudu is more flat-sided and narrow in the ribcage, making it appear very upright. "Sometimes I focus on the flow or action of an animal and will have one running or jumping," he says. At the same time, he depicts

the spirit of the animal, balancing the emotional with the anatomical to form an accurate package with a loose and fluid artistry.

Katrina, Doellinger's wife of just a few months, has worked for him for two years and has become a vital business partner and a boon to his art and career. In addition to being the love of his life, she has taken on running his business, allowing him more time and freedom not only to design and sculpt his pieces, but also to do the patinas, which is not unheard of, but is uncommon.

Doellinger's artistic path may not have adhered to convention, but there is little about it he would change. He'll also tell you he's still a

work in progress and that it's thrilling "to create something that people today and in future generations will see and own. Not many people get to create something with their hands that can last for more than a century," he says. 

Mary Nelson is a writer living in Minneapolis, Minnesota.