



wood and stone

UNCOVERING THE ESSENCE



Steve Kestrel



Pati Stajcar



Peregrine O'Gormley

The best artist has that thought alone which is contained within the marble shell; only the sculptor's hand can break the spell to free the figures slumbering in the stone.

- Michelangelo Buonarroti

Considering Michelangelo's famous quotation got us wondering what the actual process of releasing slumbering figures from stone—or wood—is like. We turned to Ft. Collins-based stone sculptor Steve Kestrel (b. 1947); Evergreen wood and stone sculptor Pati Stajcar (b. 19658); and La Conner Washington-based wood sculptor Peregrine O'Gormley (b. 1977) to discuss their carving processes and what inspires them.

WHY CARVE IN STONE OR WOOD? WHY NOT JUST USE CLAY?

Steve Kestrel: There's such variation in stone. Carving anything, mainly carving stone, makes you do things you normally wouldn't do in clay like having to deal with the shape of the stone to work out a composition. And if you find a flaw, you work around it. You don't work around anything in clay because you can always change it back; it's always forgiving.

Pati Stajcar: They're so totally different. One is reductive, one is additive. When carving in wood and stone, I like getting just the essences of what I'm trying to say. I go for a much cleaner line, without extraneous details.

Peregrine O'Gormley: With wood, it's always been something that's a source of pleasure. My mind does fairly well with purely subtractive work. It's more challenging and you don't have as many options, and you can't go backwards. It's like climbing without a rope: it's important to be completely focused and get it right the first time.

WHAT DREW YOU TO SCULPTING AND, MORE SPECIFICALLY, CARVING?

Steve: I think my ancestors were tool makers and object makers. I've always been good at manipulating tools with my hands. And I was always much better with geometry than algebra. For me, there's some connection between how my brain works and making something three-dimensional with my hands.



Born to be Wild, Steve Kestrel,
Bronze, 56" x 52" x 25"



Water Ways, Pati Stajcar,
Wood, 12" x 30" x 12"



Dance of Kings, Pati Stajcar,
Wood, 48" x 38" x 41"

For me, I find my wood and live with it for a while and see what it wants to be. When I know, I start by getting rid of the big chunks...

Pati: I was working at Frontier Airlines in a high-stress job and was looking for an outlet to lose myself in. One of the men at Frontier was a woodcarver and he taught workshops. I started taking classes from him and found that I loved being in that mindset where I was totally lost in it, so that I was living in an entirely different space.

Peregrine: Having early access to a knife as a five/six-year-old, that was my first exposure to being able to conceive of a form and execute it. I was given clay and wax, but I felt like I couldn't achieve the really clean, sharp edged forms I got from carving.

CARVING THE LARGE-SCALE SCULPTURES YOU HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO TACKLE SEEMS LIKE DIFFICULT, TECHNICAL WORK. WALK US THROUGH THE BASIC STEPS OF THE PHYSICAL PROCESS.

Steve: I find a lot of river stones on the property here. I've got a front end loader and hundreds of stones from 10 to 6,000 pounds on pallets around the studio. I always go out and browse and see if the stone suggests something or if it fits the idea I have. Once I pick something, I set it up on a heavy-duty stand with wheels and move it around to see it in different attitudes to cue in on how the image will work. When I figure that out, I start drawing on the stone in chalk; that takes days, figuring out how I can incorporate my idea into the stone. When I'm satisfied, I go in with a grease pencil, so the lines don't get lost. For the actual carving, I take a 14" diamond saw—we're talking granite boulders—and make kerfs (slits or notches). Then I use chisel and hammer to get rid of excess material. After that, I go into refining and defining.

Pati: For me, I find my wood and live with it for a while and see what it wants to be. When I know, I start by getting rid of the big chunks with a chainsaw, chisel and sledgehammer, and gradually go to smaller and smaller tools until I get down to within about six inches of the sculpture. Then I start sanding until I have no fingerprints left. The last piece I worked on, it took a month and a half for my fingerprints to come back. I couldn't open my phone. (laughs) I always tape my fingers but sooner or later I'm rubbing sandpaper against the skin, literally sanding my fingers while sanding the piece. But sanding is one of the most important parts: you can sand the life out of it, or you can sand the life into it.

Peregrine: I go from conception to finding the material. The challenge is finding a piece of wood that has volume and high enough integrity to accommodate the piece I have in mind. I don't buy any wood—I find material on the beach or from downed trees in the forest, wood workers give me some and I've inherited collections from artists. So, when I have my idea, I go through my "wood library" to pick something. I start by using a chain saw; I have to be careful because it removes material quickly. From there I go to an angle grinder to rough out the form. Once I've gotten to the space where I've taken everything off I can, I move into using bent knives and gouges and Japanese single bevel knives. From this point on it's all done by hand. Once the piece is completed, I use a mixture of beeswax and grapeseed oil that I melt into the surface so it gets embedded into the wood as it cools.

LET'S TALK ABOUT ONE SCULPTURE THAT WILL BE IN THE SHOW AND THE INSPIRATION BEHIND IT.

Steve: *Born to be Wild* came out of a unique stone I found here in the creek bed, a five-foot by three-foot rock of granite, quartzite

and schist that had sat around for a few years. I wanted to do a razorback boar but couldn't figure out what to do with all the space between the legs until I thought to make it a sow with piglets. The original sold to the Wildlife Museum in Jackson, so you'll be getting the bronze of it. I don't turn everything I do into bronze; some stone pieces don't work because the character of the stone, the texture and color, is so unique that it doesn't translate. I initially thought the stone for *Born to be Wild* was too integral but I think she's interesting enough that this casting was successful.

Pati: It's always one of those 'ah-ha' moments when I realize what the image will be in a piece of wood. As an artist, I'm exposed to so many things that my mind is constantly looking for the essence in the wood or stone. Like looking for something I've forgotten. With the piece *Dance of Kings*, I'd always wanted to do a life-sized peacock, full tail spread. I had a huge burl—four-foot across—that I'd been looking at for about eight years. It was such a big piece of wood it needed to dry out. But every time I looked at the grains of that burl, I could see feathers spread as if two peacocks were together and spinning in a dance.

Peregrine: For me, the material doesn't dictate form. Having a piece of material and saying, "What can I do with this?"—that doesn't work for me. I have to have an image in my mind before starting. The piece *Hmmm...* is about being at loose ends, when you're in the middle of this big tangle and it's like, "Hmmm, how do I proceed?" I got the idea from the character of the Pacific wren, one of the sweetest birds out there. They're constantly in those briar patches. It looks impossible, but they always just hop right out with ease and grace, no worries.

ARE YOU TRYING TO COMMUNICATE SOMETHING LARGER THROUGH YOUR WORK?

Steve: My work is about celebrating the natural world but also looking at the disconnect between civilization and nature at large. It seems like the human species is becoming more disconnected. Animals are losing habitat and their lives because of pressure from humans; we're literally devouring the planet. Not all my work has a message, but most of it does.

Pati: My work often has an ecological bent. I do a lot of urban interface pieces where you'll see a bird on an industrial base as a way of looking at how we've encroached on wild spaces. I don't want to say I'm an activist, because I don't normally tell people the story behind my work, I let them come to their own conclusions, but I know the meaning: I did it for me.

Peregrine: Absolutely. The story is the most important thing. My hope is that the image speaks for itself but for me personally the purpose of creating the piece is inextricably related to personal meaning. ■



100 Year Orange Roughy,
Peregrine O'Gormley, Bronze, 12" x 7" x 10"



Hmmm..., Peregrine O'Gormley, Yellow Cedar
and Fencing Wire, 9" x 11" x 10"