

Not Just Ducks...A Conversation With Tom Quinn

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“They say ‘You paint ducks’ – like I was going for the duck stamp!” Tom Quinn is amused, but a little indignant. A year after an illness that temporarily left him without the energy to lift a brush, Tom Quinn is painting, training a new Labrador puppy, and preparing for a new show on the theme of raptors with sculptor Tony Angell and fellow painter Lars Jonsson at the Gerald Peters Gallery in Santa Fe. And, at the moment, he’s not doing any ducks.

Quinn is without a doubt one of our best portrayers of American wildlife. From his studio, a converted bakery in the little northern California town of Point Reyes Station, have come some of our times’ most luminous and elegant images of big mammalian predators, ungulates, raptors, and small birds. So why the “duck painter” reputation?

“Some presses that make prints imagined themselves to have ...art directing skills. They’d try to get artists to paint what they thought the market wanted...say, they had a lack of cardinals in the snow in their inventory. Some artists took their direction and lost credibility.”

“I’m gonna do what I’m gonna do, anyway. I paint ‘animals of the west,’”

I ask if he is moving toward what I, half-kidding, call “charismatic megafauna.” He laughs again. “I like humble stuff too! Look at my badgers. I also like shrews, weasels, shrikes, snipe...not just wolves and mountain lions.”

I have always wondered what selections drive Quinn’s choices, which include water and game birds, bison, and hummingbirds in addition to predatory mammals and raptors. Naively, I’ve always assumed – or projected – a bit of predator romanticism. It certainly animates my own preferences, as a hunter and falconer, and he is both a hunter and a retriever trainer. After nearly twenty years of talking to Quinn about wildlife and painting, you might think I would know.

Quinn’s answer turns out to be far more interesting and subtle than a mere identification with his subjects, though. We are talking about a favorite of both his and mine from his recent work – the spare portrait of a pronghorn antelope peering at a sharptail grouse that he calls “Above Camas Creek.” I consider it perhaps the best portrait of the species since Carl Rungius’ more than a century ago. When I ask him why pronghorn, he answers “I like animals that are totally gradated from one end to the other.”

Gradated? What does he mean? “Think of a Steller’s Jay – all charcoal at one end, then that barred peacock blue on his tail. The pronghorn has gradation, as well as those loopy shapes on the throat, that line between belly and upper body.”

It’s an answer only a painter could give. I push him a bit more: “You mean that you’re not choosing them because they are ‘charismatic megafauna?’” But, though smiling, he’s serious. “First of all hey have to have the goods...these tonal changes. Bison have it too – almost black in front, sunny on the other end. Or a shrike. Look at it without really seeing and it’s just a mockingbird. Then you see the changes. A shrike is the equivalent of a bison – in one, a deadly airiness; in the other, mass. But they both have these changes of tone.”

As always when I talk art with Quinn , we are now free-associating, digressing, gong down byways of craft and natural history. He’s rolling now.

“I make a point of painting animals I know a little bit about. People say they recognize where the painting was done. It was done in a studio – it’s a fairly abstract exercise. But something resonates.”

I mention Hemingway’s advice to imagine everything, then put down only the most necessary details. Then the reader – or in this case, the viewer – will experience the whole scene. He agrees.

“I didn’t really know pronghorn. I had never touched one, killed or butchered one. Then I met a guy – a Ph.D. biologist in Jackson Hole. He had studied antelope, tracked them with radio collars. He could take you out to follow them – it was just like the Serengeti. Now I have enough credentials. One day, you say “I think I’ll jump off the high board today.””

Wolves are an animal of more subtle pattern than the striking contrasts in a pronghorn, a shrike, a western grebe. What are the attractions of wolves? As I suspect, there is a bit of romance there. “I’ve had many terrific dogs...beyond pet quality. A dog nobody else but me trained in the Retriever Hall of Fame. I like dogs’ forms. I’ve picked ticks off them, picked foxtails out of their noses...it’s so hands-on. Wolves are like dogs. I wouldn’t have that relationship with a horse – I’m not a horseman.”

But there is something else. “The wolf is a twilight creature. Other things – jays and crows, for instance – are brassy, up-front. You’re making a huge mistake if you disclose too much about a nocturnal creature – if you show too much. Too damn much info, if you consider their lifestyle. The more mystery you can get into the picture, the better.”

“We don’t see wolves much anymore, but we have a long history. We still remember. We know them.”

We drift into our mutual passion for raptors. In the last few years Quinn has painted all three of the accipiters (one, the sharpshin, several times, the consequence of a rescue bird that spent several days in his studio) plus a redtail, a gyrfalcon, and more. There is no “why raptors?” between us; our obsession with hunting birds has grown past that a long time ago.

It’s hard to even begin to pick a favorite. I have changed my pick many times. The doubly symmetrical “Gyrfalcon Mirror” has always impressed me. Later I became enamored of the kinetic “Sharpshin-Golden Crown” with the hawk a blaze of motion in pursuit of the brilliant little ember that is a kinglet; more recently, his stern mantling redtailed hawk with a sharptail grouse. But one always comes up, again and again: the tiny (7 3/4” X 13 3/8”) watercolor of a goshawk holding a Steller’s jay called “Another Measure of Blue.”

I consider myself a connoisseur of goshawks and their portraits. I have handled them since my teens, and they are my totem bird. Back in the early Seventies I saw a series of 17th Century Japanese screens depicting goshawks, and they became my standard. In this century, and maybe in the west, only two painters of the gos, the most elegant of all the predator birds, have matched this exacting standard: the Russian master Vadim Gorbатов, and Tom Quinn.

I know the story of this one very well. The week after he finished it, he sent me a transparency taped to a scrap of paper. In its entirety – I am looking at it as I write – the text reads: “Greetings Steve: this fell out of my Brush last week. I was pleased.”

So: how do you arrange it that such marvels “fall out of your brush?”

“There’s a phrase I used to use with another painter friend: ‘brush mileage.’”

“If you don’t do the difficult ones and stay with them; then, also, if you don’t destroy them if they don’t work; you’ll never do the angelic ones that somehow paint themselves.”

“Watercolor is a dangerous medium. You have to be prepared to destroy it if it gets away from you. You can lose control pretty easily. Too many contrivances and it’ll look like dirty underwear.”

“This one actually took me only a day and a half. I came out the next morning – and it was still cool!”

He adds: “It’s a little painting. After you finish a monster (I’m working on one now) you don’t just start another monster.” “Little painting” – perhaps. But I compare it to what might be Quinn’s favorite bird portrait of all time: Joseph Crawhall’s white domestic pigeon. It’s that good.

He mentions another favorite as we move on to the general subject of birds of prey, soon to be the subject of a big three-man show at the Peters. “Owls. I like little owls, but I admire big owls. Great horneds.”

“I admire them for their strength and efficiency. I know I have a lid on my duck pen.”

Angell and Jonsson, as well as our mutual friend Gorbatov, are among the portrayers of the wild we most admire. Tom is excited about the show, and lavish in his praise. “Have you seen Lars’ eagles? He has them down! Tony too. These guys *go outside*. What they do is often very brave – physically too.”

“They are intellectually able to a high degree. They have mileage. They have emotional responses to animals, some of which animals I know.”

“They are *invested* – not just choosing a market. I admire both, and respect both. It is a privilege to show with both! This doesn’t sound too art-show brochure, does it?”

Not at all. It seems, into his seventh decade, Quinn has found himself in an admirable place: living where he wants, with the perfect partner – his wife Jeri is also a painter of note; training a new pup; putting in enough “brush mileage” to expect an

occasional gift of grace like “Blue”; and now, exhibiting with two of his finest peers. It will be a must-see exhibition.