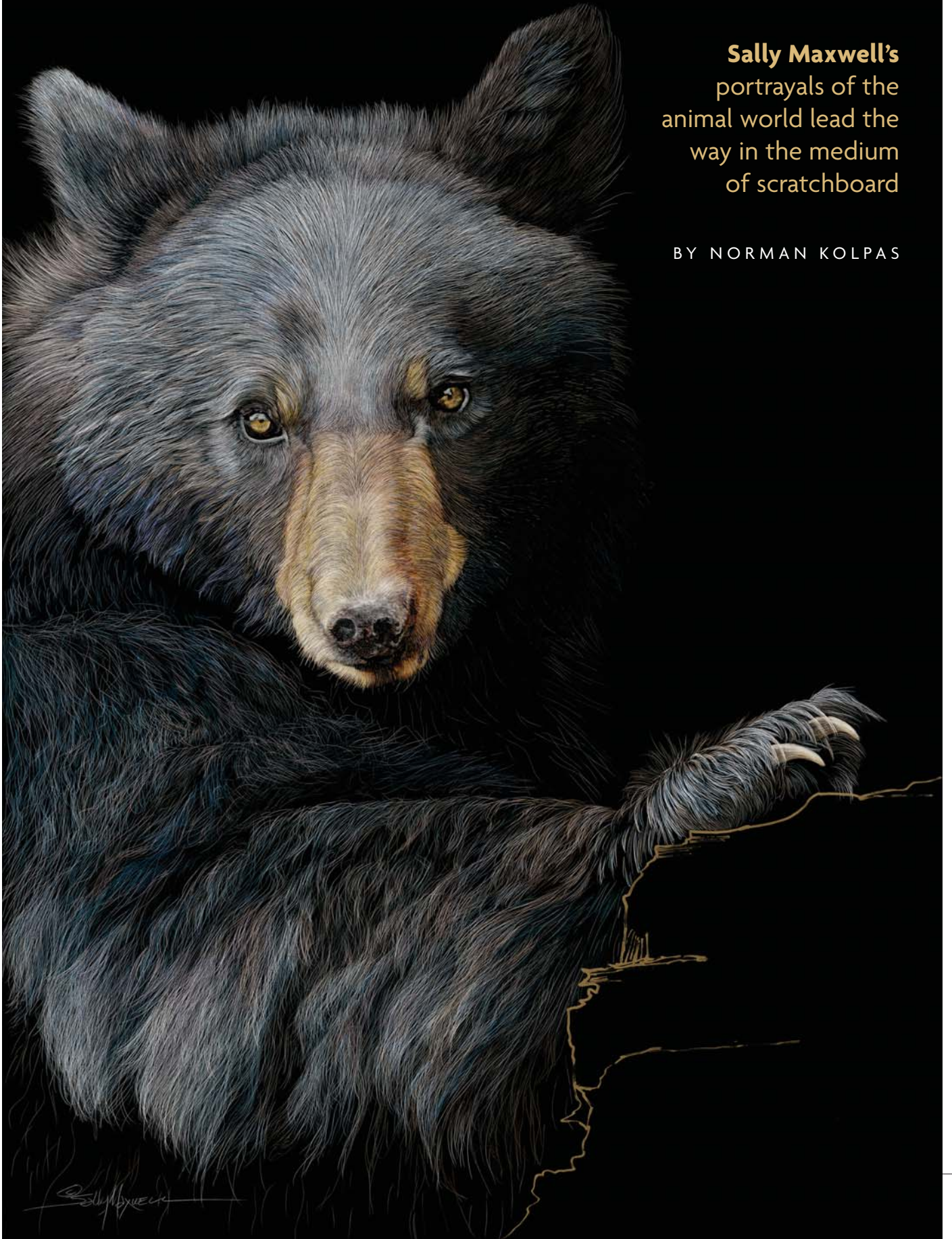


TRAILBLAZER

Sally Maxwell's
portrayals of the
animal world lead the
way in the medium
of scratchboard

BY NORMAN KOLPAS





▲ Yang, colored scratchboard, 24 x 36.

◀ Mama Bear, colored scratchboard, 36 x 24.

BESTOWING THE TITLE of pioneer on any artist runs the risk of indulging in the sort of hyperbole rife in any field where prices can soar and competition abounds. Yet Sally Maxwell truly is both a leader and an explorer in the compelling medium of scratchboard. The term refers to a commercially made, rigid board that has been coated with a layer of bright white, low-temperature-fired kaolin clay and then covered evenly with jet-black India ink.

Wielding a finely honed stainless-steel tool as another artist might use a pencil or pen to draw, Maxwell carefully scratches through the black surface with both thin and thick lines or stippled dots that allow the white clay to shine through, as if her artwork were magically illuminated from within. She then often enhances the white with colored India inks, painstakingly and subtly applied to enhance the lifelike appearance

of her subjects: denizens of the animal world, often endangered, and always portrayed by the artist in thoughtfully considered compositions that stir a deep rapport with viewers.

Maxwell has been working in scratchboard for more than 50 years now, gradually helping to elevate it from a niche medium used largely by illustrators or hobbyists to one that is recognized and respected by artists and collectors. “I am the pioneer in it,” she says with a quiet pride completely devoid of boastfulness. “And I’m still discovering what can be done in this medium.”

MAXWELL GREW UP inspired by a sense of discovery. “My daddy was an ‘executive gypsy,’ a phrase I’ve coined,” she says. “He solved problems for the companies that hired him.” That talent moved the family from central



representation

Manitou Galleries, Santa Fe, NM;
Marcus Ashley Gallery, South Lake Tahoe, CA.

upcoming shows

American Women Artists Lifting the Sky Juried Show, online, through August 21.

Solo show, **Marcus Ashley Gallery**, July 9-10.

Animal Impressions, Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, Tucson, AZ, August 21-November 7.



Twilight Time, ink/etching, 24 x 36.

Illinois, where Sally was born, to Iowa, Indiana, back to Illinois, to the eastern Connecticut coast, and back to Illinois, where Sally attended high school. Her mother, meanwhile, instilled a love of music and art. “I still have her wooden oil-painting box,” Maxwell adds.

Throughout her school years, young Sally demonstrated talents that reflected both her parents’ influences, studying biology, chemistry, mathematics, and languages while also throwing herself wholeheartedly into art classes. One of her earliest creative memories traces back to her third-grade classroom in Mystic, CT. “I sat at a flip-open desk right next to the chalkboard,” she recalls. “Mrs. Brady was very strict, and when we got done with our work we were required to sit quietly with our hands on our desks. I’d sneak over to the

chalkboard, grab a piece of chalk, take my bobby pin, and secretly carve those little chalks into people, saving them in my desk.” At the end of the school year, while walking home, Sally stopped by Mrs. Brady’s house, knocked on the door, and gave her a handful of the little sculptures. “She was very surprised,” Maxwell says. “I brought her to tears.”

Around the same time, she tried her hand at plein-air painting, carrying her mother’s paintbox to the harborside of historic Mystic Seaport. In the process, Sally learned an important lesson about herself: “Sitting down to paint outside like that, you have to be spontaneous. But I love detail too much to want to do that.”

Back in Illinois after high school, Maxwell spent a year studying art in college, got married, and eventually went to work for an office products company. There her

graphic-design talents eventually led her to design business forms, a skill that transferred well to an ad agency when the young couple moved to Milwaukee, and then to her and her husband’s own little graphic art and design agency in Illinois. Early on in those years, while Maxwell was pregnant with the first of their three children, her husband came back from a business trip with an unusual gift for his wife: a French art product called “scraperboard,” a flimsier and smaller-scale precursor to her current medium. “You might want to try doing something with this,” he suggested.

She did. Scraperboard illustrations for clients soon gave way to other subjects for her own enjoyment, including some animals. Quickly, she says, “I realized the potential for this stuff. During that time period, I even started putting a

little bit of color in it.” By 1970, she began showing those works locally. Looking at some of the delicate lines she’d achieved, she says, “People thought I was putting hairs between glass. Nobody had ever seen anything like them before.”

By the late 1970s, she came across the

world of fine-art prints, creating her own line of limited-edition prints based on her artwork and eventually bringing in more revenue than the couple’s agency. Following a divorce in 1983, she branched out to creating scraperboard images sold on collectible plates and

figurines. “I traveled all over to events, signing the plates for collectors,” she says of that heady time.

Eventually, in the mid-1980s, Maxwell moved to La Grange, TX, in the peaceful countryside between Austin and Houston, where her parents had retired.



Hey There Little Red Riding Hood, colored scratchboard, 24 x 12.



Become the Bear, colored scratchboard, 60 x 36.

That's where one night she met the charming and handsome George Maxwell Jr. "We started dating in late '86, and in January 1987 he asked me to marry him," she relates. They settled down in a house on 25 acres of the former dairy farm that had been run by several generations of George's family, a landscape with a Texas state wildlife tax exemption that ensures their property abounds in whitetail deer, rabbits, wild turkeys, wood ducks, herons, raccoons, hawks, coyotes, bobcats, and other critters that provide constant interest and inspiration. "We're required to be stewards of the land," Maxwell says.

MEANWHILE, about 25 years ago, the artist learned of Ampersand, a family-owned company in nearby Austin that was manufacturing a new, sturdier, artist-quality version of scraperboard on tempered archival hardboard panels available in sizes as large as 4 by 8 feet. "So, turn me loose!" she says of the creative opportunities that the product offered.

She approached Ampersand with the idea for her to produce scratchboard how-to kits sold with in-depth instruction booklets and four new designs each year. Maxwell began promoting the kits and the company far and wide, in the process catapulting herself into fame

for her medium. "Since the beginning, millions of the kits have been sold," she says. Not surprisingly, when the International Society of Scratchboard Artists was launched in 2011, she was named as one of its seven Master Members. That number has since grown to 18, and overall membership has skyrocketed, thanks in no small part to the attention Maxwell continues to attract to scratchboard through her exceptional creations.

Consider, for example, *THE ORACLE*, a work featuring a handsome wolf standing amid the gnarled branches of a cedar, his head turned back to regard a raven cawing on a nearby branch. Maxwell



The Oracle, colored scratchboard, 24 x 36.



Fading—Wild Clearwater Steelhead, ink/etching, 24 x 36.

based the scene on multiple reference photos she had taken over the years during her and George's travels across the West, thoughtfully combining them for her final composition. "Scratchboard is a double-edged sword, both marvelous and frustrating," she says. "But solving a problem gives you the feeling of, 'I did it! I did it! I did it!'" When the process is going well, she adds, "especially for the linear areas, the repetitive motion is very much like chanting a mantra or saying the Rosary. It puts you in a zone that rewards you immediately. And then, when you show it to someone and they like it as much as you do, that's a double whammy!" But merely liking an image is an understatement for the impact her pieces have; the artist sometimes describes her works and the impressions they make on viewers as "prophetic."

An added pleasure in her creative pro-

cess comes when she subtly introduces color once she has completed the initial carving or scratching process. She uses colored India inks either in liquid form or with Pitt pens, often applying them, erasing to subdue them, and adding other colors on top to achieve just the tonal range she desires. "It's an additive method, with subtraction," she says, realizing the quixotic nature of that explanation and then adding, "Somehow, my brain just does it."

Ever on the lookout for fresh creative territory to explore, Maxwell has also begun to create directly on the pristine white surfaces of Ampersand's Claybord panels. Her 2019 piece *FADING—WILD CLEARWATER STEELHEAD* captures the limpid, aqueous hues of a just-caught fish on a riverbank. The colors of the image itself, however, can be seen to fade toward the bottom of the frame, the

result of yet another new technique the artist developed—"I won't tell you what it is," she laughs—to convey the suggestion of the perils faced by this endangered species of the Pacific Northwest.

Indeed, speak at any length with Maxwell and it's undeniable that she remains ever the pioneer. "I don't push to look for new areas to explore," she insists. "It just happens." ♦

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Mountain Living* and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.

See more of Maxwell's work at
www.southwestart.com/featured/maxwell-s-jun2021.