



Last Waltz, bronze, 78" by 69" by 30"

"Cranes have elaborate courtship dances. They are a great vehicle for some elegant compositions."

Paul Rhymer had just received one of the biggest honors of his artistic life, and he was making those noises humble people make—noises that sound an awful lot like, “Why did they pick me?”

In this case, “they” would be the folks who organize and conduct the annual Birds in Art event in Wausau, Wisconsin, who selected Rhymer as Master Wildlife Artist of 2023. A longtime attraction of the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Birds In Art has included works by thousands of avian artists

from around the world.

Most years—not all—they select a Master Wildlife Artist. And Rhymer was just getting used to the fact that he had been given the honor for his work in bronze, many of which will be on display during the event, which will be conducted the week after Labor Day. “It’s the honor of my career,” he says from his home in Washington, D.C. “It’s such a big deal for me.”

Once he arrives in Wausau for the event, he will be overseeing the installation of more than a dozen works, including one that stretches 11 feet high and 15 feet wide. It’s a dramatic work featuring 19 of his favorite birds: ravens, magpies, and crows. Titled *Corvid 19; Murder Suspects*, he describes it as a “chaotic interaction.”

“It’s basically a commentary on what a chaotic and devastating thing

COVID was for the world,” Rhymer says. “Regardless of what you feel about COVID, it messed a lot of things up. You could be an anti-vaxxer, you could be all-in for masks, but think of the countless number of businesses that went out of business, about over a million people died, and the thousands of people still suffering.”

Ravens have always fascinated Rhymer. “I love how intelligent they are; super smart,” he says. “All the corvids are smart, ravens chief among them. They have so much attitude. And unlike crows, they visually have a lot of beautiful texture, a lot of different kind of feathers. And I try to do this a lot in my art—I try to allude to the fact that we have so many beliefs and feelings about different types of animals. And ravens, man, there are so many ideas and myths and legends and all kinds of interactions that we have with ra-

“I thought, ‘I want to do this.’”

(Left) 3 Outlaw Wisemen: Waylon, Willie and Merle, bronze on wood and steel, 72" by 56" by 36"

“Once this trio was finished, someone joked about reminding them of the Three Wisemen. I liked the idea and decided to add a hat tip to my favorite outlaw country artists. Can you guess which one is which?”



Mama Bear, bronze, 42" by 32" by 36"

"When my mother was young, she sculpted a lovely little bear from one she saw at the zoo. I still have that ceramic bear, and I used her pose for this life-size sculpture. I consider this piece a collaboration between me and my 12-year-old mother."

vens. There's just so much to work with there."

Rhymer has been a full-time artist for the past 13 years, though he was fully active in art during, and as part of, his two-decade career at the Smithsonian Institution, where he developed models and other 3D works for a broad range of exhibits.

From the start, a career in art was inevitable. Rhymer's mother, Kay Crane, was a painter who today runs a small gallery in Colorado. His father, Dan Rhymer, was a taxidermist who created works for the Smithsonian, and later for parks and nature centers in Maryland.

Both areas of art fascinated

Rhymer—the painting upstairs and the taxidermy in the basement. "I was always kind of dinking around in the basement," he says. "I was around it but I didn't really have an intention to be a taxidermist. But I knew I wanted to do art."

When he was in his early 20s, after earning a degree in studio art from Montgomery Community College in Rockville, Maryland, Rhymer took an entry-level job at the Smithsonian, doing illustration and basic designing for one of the museum's exhibit fabrication offices. Within a year he was assigned to the model shop, where he created works that included model ships and animals. As a result of his experiences at home, he also found himself doing taxidermy.

As the model shop experience stimulated an interest in three-dimensional art, a visit with artist Gary Staab sealed bronze sculpture as the specific direction for Rhymer to take. The two had met at the Smithsonian and, after Staab moved to Colorado, Rhymer visited him there and was surprised to find his friend was doing bronzes.

"I thought, 'I want to do this,'" he says. "So it took a long time for me to kind of get going. But, once I actually started going and did my first one—that was in the late '90s, my first bronze—I have been pretty much full-bore at it ever since."

For years, Rhymer worked at the Smithsonian during the day and on his own art at night, on weekends, and during vacations. "I was using up all my vacation going to shows and stalking galleries," he says. "I treated it like a job; I always have. Once I got started, I knew this was something I was going to treat very seriously."

Today, Rhymer has three employees who help cast his sculptures in the full-service foundry in his studio. "There's a whole lot of technology that is coming in, and it's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when that radically changes how people approach it," he says. "But art is still art, regardless of the actual technology. I like the old-school thing. My wife [Carolyn Thome] is a model-



Life in the Fast Lane, bronze, 96" by 72" by 36"

"I spend a lot of time in the Southwest. As a result, there's usually a roadrunner on the sculpting stand. At some point it felt like it was time to make a bigger statement with that love affair."



War Eagle, bronze, 24" by 36" by 32"

"While sculpting this piece, my oldest friend in the world passed. He was a faithful Auburn alum. This is dedicated to him."



(Left) Raven Celebrates Inventing the Wheel, bronze on stone, 40" by 28" by 15"

"When I designed this piece, I thought it would be fun to pay homage to the intelligence of ravens; that's when the title idea came to me. To further the idea, I wrote a fable about ravens inventing the wheel."

maker at the Smithsonian, and she's very good at the digital sculpting and scanning stuff and then changing it and doing all kinds of really cool stuff. She's really into the new technology."

Rhymer loves the life of a working artist—no seminars on computer security; no seminars on anything. "I work at home; I set my own hours," he says. "I do what I want to do." He also has to pay the bills, so he might sculpt another owl because he knows owls sell well. But he genuinely likes what he does; it's not a situation of selling out versus making art.

"I pick the things that I want to do that I think will sell," Rhymer says. "And then I also do other weird stuff. I have a 40-foot dung beetle that I sculpted. It took 12 years but I sold that edition out. People thought I was nuts but I just wanted to do it. I feel like, even when you do really weird stuff, if it's something you really want to do, and it's burning to get outside of you and you love it, you're going to find enough people who like it; not always, but sometimes. You don't hit a home run every time, but you get on base enough times...."

Today, Rhymer's work is carried in galleries in Scottsdale Arizona; Jackson Hole, Wyoming; and Santa Fe, New Mexico, along with others. Getting gallery representation was a big leap, one he took after getting advice from artist Walt Horton.

"He was a really good sculptor, and he was a really good marketer," Rhymer says. "He had a pile of people he mentored, and I remember asking, 'How do I get into galleries?' He said, 'Make them come to you.' That's really hard when you're try-





The Candidate, bronze, 36" by 32" by 28"


"Mr. Tom is on the stump looking for love. This piece was inspired while turkey hunting during the 2016 election."

ing to figure out how to do this. Fortunately, I had a job."

"I started doing sculpture shows, wildlife art shows—good shows where there's a market for high-end wildlife art or sculpture. I started doing those things, started meeting [gallery owners]. I'm also a really firm believer in art associa-

tions and societies."

Rhymer has been active for many years in the Society of Animal Artists and the National Sculpture Society. "Those were really important for me, not only for getting into exhibitions and being seen but for the people I meet, the artists I meet, at those places," he says.

Rhymer's work is currently shown at venues throughout the country, thanks to the steps he's taken to get it noticed. "You just go one step at a time," he says. 

Joe Tougas lives in North Mankato, Minnesota.