



Wing and Prayer

Grainger McKoy's sculptures are more than flights of fancy.

By Will Pollock
Photography by Ted Borg

On a chilly November evening in 1976, Grainger McKoy walked to the corner of 57th Street in Manhattan and asked himself, "Is this all there is?" The question had been bubbling in McKoy's mind even though he had already reached every artist's summit by 29 years old. His first one-man exhibit at New York's prestigious Hammer Galleries sold out in two days and earned boisterous applause from the city's art critics. His favorite sculpture of the group, two clapper rails struggling over a fiddler crab, was the final piece to sell.

Despite the paycheck warming his

Grainger McKoy (above, left) in his studio. McKoy sculpts a tern wing out of basswood (above), a material chosen for its slight grain, which allows high detail. See Resources on page 96.

breast pocket and the kudos from Manhattan collectors, McKoy began to realize that his work had grown into a dangerous obsession. His personal life had suffered greatly as he labored countless hours carving, sanding, burning and assembling sculptures to fill Hammer Galleries.

"At that point I understood that I was way off base in terms of what needed to be important," McKoy says. "I remember telling my wife,



"Gamecock," 2000, basswood, bronze and oil paint, celebrates the bicentennial of the city of Sumter, S.C., named after Thomas Sumter, the "Fighting Gamecock" of the Revolutionary War.



In his studio, McKoy assembles individually carved pieces of "Tern" (above), giving it a lighter-than-air appearance. "Sanderlings" (top), 1986, basswood, metal, walnut and oil paint.

Floride, 'Sweetheart, don't make me choose between you and my work. If you do, you'll be disappointed.' And I can't say that now. Thank God she stuck it out, because she had every reason to pick up and leave."

Since McKoy's 57th Street revelation, the artist has become an internationally recognized wildlife sculptor known for capturing the speed and vitality of his subjects. Scan the body of McKoy's work, and you might see red-shouldered hawks fighting over a copperhead snake, struggling in a familiar lack of decorum. You might also spot a flock of Carolina parakeets, flying wing-to-wing, colored by vibrant greens and reds. While his pieces are shown in universities, inns and zoology centers nationwide, McKoy sees an important parallel with the people who view and purchase his work.

"My sculpture has become a venue

for relationships," says the deeply religious McKoy. "Not with wood, but with others. People view my work as something they want to have in their homes. I'm appreciative of that, and I want to give them my best. Yet that's not the most important thing in my life."

That personal priority system reflects McKoy's younger years, when he enjoyed a supportive family environment. Raised in rural Sumter, South Carolina, by Adair and Priscilla McKoy, the artist and two older brothers lived on 10 acres in a family-built log cabin with swinging wood shutters. As his parents alternated driving him 70 miles to Columbia for art classes, they created a more nurturing home than they probably expected: His first carving, a small, understated sandpiper, was crafted when he was 14 from a piece of cypress wood cut from the roof of their own home.



“Sparrow Hawk” (above), 1998, bronze, base cast from natural objects. McKoy uses a woodburning tool (top left) to cut the life-like feather detail. “Covey Rise” (top, right), 1981, basswood, metal and oil paint.

Schooled in architecture and zoology, McKoy found a life-changing mentor in Gilbert Maggioni, a mercurial wood-carver and naturalist who owned an oyster-packing factory in nearby Beaufort. Maggioni took on McKoy as an apprentice, always challenging him in his sculpture to “be true to the bird.” There is no use applying finishing paint, Maggioni told McKoy, to a subject that has not been given its natural gift of flight. “Gilbert was the one who made me see carving as an art form, not as a craft,” McKoy says.

McKoy can maintain his commitment to accuracy by dipping into his second-hand freezer to study one of about 100 frozen birds—he holds a salvage permit to keep them legally—to make sure one of his quail carvings accurately shows four joints on its outside toe. He brings the same focus to metal sculpting and forging, his newer pursuit, where he engineers precise overlay parameters to disguise assembly seams and welding joints—a painstaking, multi-step process. McKoy’s birds are fashioned for “nod value,” a phrase that reflects how an ornithologist might study his carving, then glance back and bend his chin to his chest in

appreciation. “He captures the spirit of the animal, going way beyond where most wildlife artists go,” says Will Post, curator of ornithology at the Charleston Museum in Charleston, South Carolina. “He brings in those elements of movement and changing light and how birds reflect in the water, and portrays the iridescence of their plumage, their interaction and grouped movements. It’s quite unusual.”

Ever reinventing himself, McKoy, now in his mid-50s, has launched a new line of jewelry, crafted from sterling silver and 14-karat gold. He also will continue to interpret his wood sculpture into bronze, sterling silver and, eventually, platinum. But nowadays McKoy’s once-consuming drive has tempered into a balanced emphasis on the people around him, a mindset reinforced by the birth of his grandchild, Hannah Elizabeth Griffith, earlier this year.

“When I’m on my deathbed, what won’t be on my lips is a wish that I had carved another bird,” McKoy says. “At that point I will not be reaching for a knife; what I’ll be reaching for is a hand.” □