Artist and conservationist

John Banovich captures animals in their natural habitat—and in actual size.

Big Game

By Jennifer Ball

John Banovich answers his phone, breathless. A full-time artist who also runs his own gallery, frame shop, publishing company, retail mail order business and licensing company, he explains that the day has been full of challenges. His biggest problem is a 12-foot painting that, including its 200-pound frame, weighs a hefty 400 pounds. Not only is the piece a "forklift challenge," as Banovich calls it, its awkward size also makes it impossible to fit it into the back of the shipping truck. To top it all, his company and trusty business partner, Stacey Peretz, is on vacation at the beach and can't help out with the many problems cropping up around the studio ("I hope it's raining in Florida!" he teases). It's a chaotic day, but the Livingston, Montana, artist is still able to laugh it all off. "Do not paint large," Banovich advises. "Paint everything small, so it can fit into a truck. Miniatures! I'm going to do nothing but miniatures from now on. It's my new plan." It's unlikely, however, that the artist will follow his own suggestion; after all, while painting

Grizzly Encounter (medium, 72x52 by John Banovich.

small got him his start, painting large is what brought him into the spotlight.

Getting big

Banovich started his art career in the traditional way. After high school, he attended the University of Montana, with the intention of pursuing a double major in zoology and fine art. But the artist quickly discovered that his traditional art goals and the contemporary ideals of the art school didn't mesh, and, while zoology proved helpful for understanding the anatomy of animals, it became a frustrating subject of study. "I thought, 'double major, that'll be cool,' but then I got an 'F' in art, and zoology lost its fascination," he says. Soon after, he left the university and moved to Seattle to pursue a degree from the Art Institute of Seattle. After earning his degree, Banovich began a career as a personal trainer and worked on his art part time, managing to show his work in galleries around the country.

His lucrative career as a trainer made it seductive for the artist to continue painting on the side, but a pivotal dinner with a personal training client finally convinced him to make a go of a full-time career: "One of my personal training clients—she was a successful attorney in Seattle—brought me to dinner to meet this other successful attorney. And all he wanted to talk about was personal training, because to him I was a personal trainer *trying to be* a full-time artist. I knew right away I was always going to be presented that way and always interpreted that way—until I became a full-time artist."

So Banovich created a plan to make it big. In 1993, as a virtual unknown, he entered Seattle's Pacific Rim Wildlife Art Show. His goal: to get noticed. "I realized that there were some really good artists there, and that it would be a great way to break out of the small gallery mode," he explains. "The question was how to stand out, so I asked myself, What is it that I

Power and glory

Subjects as majestic as lions and water buffaloes require that the artist work large. Working large has many challenges. Banovich places a large mirror at an angle 15 feet behind the scaffold he uses for large works. Seeing the reversed image in the mirror allows him to check how he's doing without stepping back from the easel. Here are *Offensive Line* (below; oil, 30x90) and *Defensive Line* (at bottom; oil, 30x90).

want to say, and how can I say it in a big way?" After thinking awhile about what gallery directors had told him would sell, Banovich decided he would paint the opposite of what they suggested. "I asked myself, How do you stand out? What's nobody doing? African subjects. What else? African kill scenes. Large African kill scenes. That really interested me a lot, so I thought at least somebody would remember it."

The courage to continue

As it turned out, it was a small 8x10 piece of two lionesses, called *Heat of the Day* that won him best of show—affording him press coverage and acclaim for his work. It was a large African kill scene, however, that helped him earn the attention of the owner of the largest private wildlife collection in the United States. "It was funny—I didn't know this person at all, but we had a few minutes of nice conversation, and he asked the price of my best-of-show painting. Then the show opened, and he disappeared," Banovich says. "He walked the whole show, came back and was looking at this scene that showed a lioness that had just killed a zebra. And he said, 'I walked the whole show, and your work is the most powerful work in here.' I thanked him, and then he said, 'I'll take them both.'"

After selling both paintings, Banovich finally had the courage to become a full-time painter. The next week, armed with confidence and enough money to live for six months, the artist announced his resignation to his personal-training colleagues. "Because I won best of show, because I'd done a kill scene that was adventurous and risk-taking, the buyer had wanted to acquire my work," he explains. "It

Plains Zebra
The plains zebra, like the one shown here, is not yet in danger of extinction because it consumes rough grass and is resistant to disease. Zebras have a sense of social function; while the others in the herd rest, one zebra will stand lookout, as in *Zebra with Oxpecker* (oil, 18x20).

Dark and Light
The same attention to detail is necessary whether painting exotic animals or homely ones. For any painting, Banovich starts with a detailed sketch in pencil. In *Eye of the Raven* (oil, 13x18), he submerges one area in darkness to heighten the dramatic effect.

immediately gave me confidence that there are people who will like my work and would buy scenes that are a little more risqué."

Going wild

Thirteen years later, Banovich is still painting large—a recent exhibition of his work included three 6x5-foot paintings and four 2x3-foot pieces. To create each piece, the artist works as a filmmaker would: he starts by coming up with an idea of what he'd like to convey. He then hires a guide, whom Banovich refers to as a "location scout," to find the best places to photograph what will become references. "It's important to get great references," he explains. "With wildlife you can never fake it. Go and study animals in the wild or at the zoo whenever you can, and sketch from life—you'll learn so much in just a few minutes from this practice."

In fact, Banovich is a master at working on location. The artist has been to Africa 15 times and has visited most of the major continents; he's scheduled to go back to Africa again to film a television show called "Dangerous Games," which will air on the Outdoor Life Network. This television special, along with two others currently on air—"Wildlife Art Gallery" (Outdoor Life Network) and "Journeys of an Artist" (PBS)—are pet projects. Working on such projects gives him the opportunity to see animals in their natural habitat, of course, but also gives him a chance to share his passion for two wildlife initiatives that are important to him.

Saving the world

Saving the Siberian Tiger and the Lion Pride Initiative are projects the artist has helped create in an effort to save two species facing extinction. "Predators are an indicator of the health of an ecosystem," Banovich says. "The minute something is wrong in an environment, the predator will no longer be able to survive, and then it means the demise of that ecosystem. So I like to paint predators, and I like to focus my conservation efforts on the predator, because I know that if it's healthy, everything else is fine."

Banovich's projects propose that it's the human/animal conflict that kills many of these endangered species. Often an animal will

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The Challenge of Painting

As large as life

By John Banovich

With elephants, all of the large wrinkles must be exactly right. Once the preliminary sketch is finished, I copy it and reduce it to fit an enlarger. Then I project the sketch onto the large (72x48) canvas and complete fine details in pencil (**A**).

For the surface I prefer coarse Belgium linen, because it has a more isolated bounce (flex). I use stretcher bars that are 2½-inches thick and are joined together with dual crossbars that provide further support. I size the canvas with a light gray acrylic gesso applied with a paint roller (**B**).

After the gesso has dried, I use a large house paintbrush to apply a thin layer of acrylic over the entire canvas. For this block-in I use four values of a mixture of yellow ochre, burnt sienna, dioxazine purple and sometimes cadmium yellow (**C**). I developed a step-up platform on wheels that can take me up to 4 feet off the ground. I also put my Hughes Easel Model #5000 on pulleys so I can move the canvas up and down and from side to side.

Using a variety of flats ranging from 4 to 6 inches, I overpaint the acrylic with oil. I start at the top or background and work down and toward the front, always trying to paint wet-into-wet (**D**). Large paintings allow the artist to work on only one area at a time, so it's important to finish a section in the middle of a color value and then mix it up fresh the next morning.

For the final strokes, I sometimes soften edges and add thick, heavy strokes to give the painting a fresh look (**E**). Bottom right; *Once Upon a Time* (oil, 120x120).


A


B


C


D


E

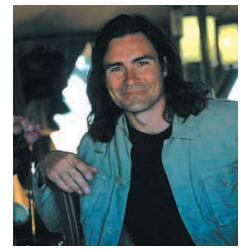
The colors of a vast continent

For African subjects like these, Banovich uses the following palette: brown madder, burnt sienna, terra rosa, raw sienna, yellow ochre, yellow ochre light, cadmium orange, Naples yellow, Naples yellow light, cadmium yellow, cadmium yellow light, permanent mauve, alizarin crimson, ultramarine blue and titanium white. Here are *Vulture's View* (above; oil, 20x48) and *Cheetah Watch* (at right; oil, 22x37).

encroach on farmlands or private residences; because they become pests to the community, they are frequently poisoned or slaughtered. If, however, economic value is placed on individual animals through ecotourism and structured, legal hunting opportunities, communities will avoid the illegal hunting of many of these predators. "You have to create a way where both animals and humans can live harmoniously together," he says. "And the only way that's going to happen is if the local people can benefit from the animals' presence. The guy who's poaching is poaching only because he's got to feed his children. If you create a reason—an economic reason—for him not to do it, then you've got the community policing poaching, because otherwise they'll lose money or jobs."

Banovich says that his desire to save wildlife is a little selfish—after all, he wants to be sure that he still has a subject to paint in 40 years. "At least there's an awakening that's occurring, and we have the ability as artists to paint nature, landscapes, wildlife, whatever. We're telling a story, and all those pictures will be revered a hundred years from now because so many of those places will be gone." But Banovich remains hopeful that this outcome isn't inevitable. While he can't know the future, he's working hard to change it by creating groups to save existing wildlife species and creating paintings that come as close to preserving the real thing as they possibly can. ♦

Jennifer Ball, former associate editor of *The Artist's Magazine*, is a freelance writer who lives in Cincinnati.



About the Artist

John Banovich, based outside Livingston, Montana, in Paradise Valley, often spends months each year studying and painting wildlife around the globe. In the early 1990s, he sold his 10-year-old personal training and fitness business to devote himself full time to painting and to conservation and humanitarian causes. For more information on his work, television shows and charitable projects, visit www.johnbanovich.com.