

ART OF NATURE | WILDLIFE | LANDSCAPE | WESTERN

WILDLIFE ART

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Art with a
**SOUTHWEST
FLAIR**

The New Fauves:
**COLOR IN
WILDLIFE ART**

The Birds of
CHRIS BACON



Got It!,
bronze, 22" high

Opposite page,
from top:
Cavorting Kai,
Colorado Yule
Marble, 17" high

Maverick Brand,
Moroccan onyx,
11" high

Mark Yale Harris has rediscovered his true passion. Despite criticism from peers, who questioned his decision to leave a lucrative 30-year profession, he's finding all of the awe, humor and exhilaration that he's been looking for by sculpting animals and humans out of natural stone.

contemporary sculptures of animals and humans out of marble, limestone and alabaster. "I love business and am really good at it," says Harris, adding, "but I've never been more excited or enthusiastic [about anything] than what I'm doing now."

Mark Yale Harris

Harris, age 66, grew up in Ohio. He worked summers in a fishing business owned by his father in the Georgian Bay region of northern Ontario, Canada. As a youngster, Harris had always loved art and was inspired by the natural environment and wildlife of northern Ontario. But on the advice of his parents, he all but abandoned his interest in art to study business. Following 30 years in the hospitality industry, Harris returned to art in 1994.

After collecting several sculptures by Native American artist Bill Prokopiaf, a protégé of Alan Houser, he eventually asked the sculptor to act as his mentor. A bottle of vodka and a steak dinner bought Harris three years of understudy with Prokopiaf. From his home in Austin, Texas, Harris traveled to Santa Fe, N.M., for 10-day stints in his mentor's studio. He went on to study with sculptors Doug Hyde, James Surls and John Forno.

Harris became enthralled with the art form. "To me, working with stone is kind of a metaphor for life. You're given a shape. You have to deal with it, take away from it, and you can't go back. You have one chance to do it right," he says.

The fish, bears, long-horned cattle and humans Harris depicts in stone vary in size from large, 4,000-pound, 50-by-36-inch marble sculptures, to small, 10-by-8-inch ones.

His work is simplistic, yet bold and energetic. Harris is an admirer of minimalism. "I'm fascinated with shape and movement because it speaks to energy, anxiety, happiness and sadness." Echoing the philosophy of Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi, Harris says, "When you see a fish you don't think of its scales, do you? You think of its speed, its floating, flashing body seen through water. I want just the flash of its spirit."

The fish and bears reflect the environment and life experiences of Harris' time in northern Ontario. "I cleaned a lot of fish in my day." As for the bears, "They're my fun art, because they make me laugh and smile." He returns to the region regularly for



Co-founder of the national hotel chain Red Roof Inns, and founder of Amerisuites hotel chain, his interests in which were eventually sold, Harris lately has staked his entrepreneurial and artistic claim on the Southwest sculpting scene. Since the late 1990s, he has gained a reputation for carving

canoe trips. The long-horned cattle come from his fascination with the cowboy life and time he spent in Big Bend, Texas. He has done cattle drives, and spends many vacations riding horses in the Chihuahuah Desert around Big Bend. Harris says his human interpretations are simply observations of life and people, and drawing live models.

By 1999, he'd left the business world altogether to become a full-time artist. "I had a difficult time making the change," he says. Many of his former business associates asked him when he was going to get a real job.

Jokes and criticism aside, his zeal to pursue art is paying off. For the past five years he's exhibited his works at *Sculpture in the Park* in Loveland, Colo. He was also invited to show at the Holter Museum in Helena, Mont., La Posada de in Santa Fe, N.M., and the Roswell Museum in Roswell, N.M., among other venues. The Austin Visual Art Association named Harris one of the top 10 Texas artists in 2003. He is featured in galleries and public and private collections throughout the United States.

As for his future, Harris plans to continue to explore new forms and new ways of expressing his observations in natural materials. He also aspires to one day sculpt a monumental public work of art. —**E.B.**

