

BY TODD WILKINSON

# Art Maximum OF THE HUNT Impact

*Painter John Banovich, 20 years a SCI favorite,  
Goes Big for Wildlife Art Fans in Las Vegas*

BAHATI YA KAWINDA



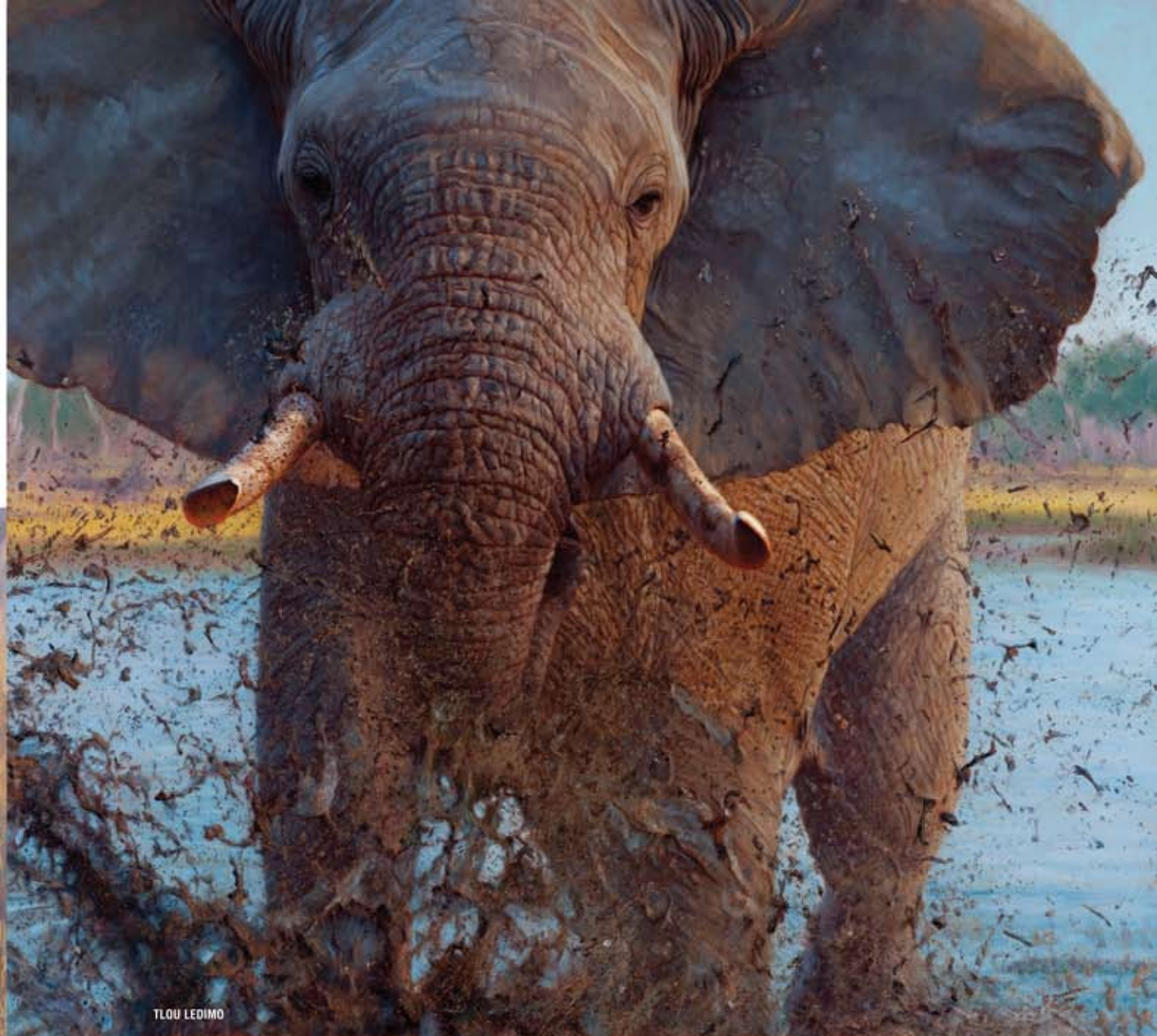
Precious little that John Banovich does these days is small. He's known for living large, dreaming big, painting expansively. And, when it comes to portraying African animals and conserving them, he is always thinking heroic, stalking opportunities and taking risks in order to achieve maximum visual impact.

"There is nothing that makes a work of art feel truer than when it's inspired by real life and direct observation," he says. "Sometimes that means putting yourself into a position where, if things go terribly wrong, you're in trouble."

During Banovich's high-adrenalin forays to gather reference material in the African bush, lions have hunted him. He's left tuskers and hippos so irritated by his desire to venture closer and look them in the eye that they've come stomping at full charge, resulting in narrow escape. Then there's Cape buffalo. As anyone who has spent time around the temperamental widow-makers knows, he says, lowering one's guard comes with the threat of imminent peril.

Banovich is not the kind of intrepid seeker who quakes in his boots. His fearlessness is one reason





TLOU LEDIMO

why he's counted among the best living sporting artists in the world. His oils cover walls in museums, trophy rooms and office buildings in a dozen countries.

While the 2014 SCI gathering in Las Vegas represents a convergence of personal milestones for Banovich—it marks his 20th year at SCI and his 50th birthday—viewers this year will be treated to the most ambitious showing of works he's ever staged. He regards the event as his own grateful homage to hunters who have brought his art into their lives.

"Any success I've had," he says modestly, "reaches back to the days when collectors here expressed their confidence in me and my work. I want my booth to be a place where we can have a party around art."

Over the years, Banovich has always turned his SCI gallery tent into a happening. He's brought in racecars, NASCAR champions and grand pianos, vintage wines, live animals, celebrities and

heroes from the front lines of wildlife conservation. As a note to readers, Banovich's original lion painting, "King," on the cover of this magazine will be featured at auction to raise money for urgent lion conservation efforts. Time limited giclée canvas prints are also being made available to SCI through the last day of the convention in support of the SCI Foundation Lion Defense Fund and Banovich Wildscapes Foundation's Lion PRIDE initiative.

"John Banovich has raised the bar for excellence in wildlife art," say Dick and Mary Cabela, the purveyors of hunting and fishing equipment who need no introduction.

Five years ago, a hulking coffee table book, *Beasts: The Collected Art of John Banovich* asserted the diversity and depth of Banovich's portfolio. Some critics said it formally announced Banovich's rightful place in the pantheon of 21<sup>st</sup> century wildlife artists. Shocking perhaps is that his rise, in the beginning, was hardly assured.





TOO GOOD TO RESIST

In 1994, Banovich entered SCI as all newcomers artists do, receiving no preferential treatment and having to earn his way up from the bottom. His first 10 X 10-foot booth was located off the beaten path, tucked into a corner. "What I love about SCI is the same thing I love about America," he says. "You create your own opportunities. The more you mix with people and exchange ideas, the more friends you make. I'm lucky to say that most of my collectors become friends and vice versa."

A sign of his values, Banovich has never forgotten his humble, working-class roots in the gritty copper mining city of Butte, Montana. He came of age as the mines were shutting down. The economic devastation lit a fire in him. He spent his youth, drawing, hiking and hunting in Montana's backcountry, absorbing the adventure scenes that appeared in magazines like *Sports Afield* and *Outdoor Life*.

Part of Banovich's charisma is his athletic build and long-locked rock-star persona. Half his life ago, he moved away from Butte, first to study art and zoology at University of Montana and then arrived in Seattle as a mere twenty-something, working as a personal fitness trainer.

"My world was so different, like it is for a lot of men when you're young. It was contained by the four walls of a gym. I painted only on weekends," he says. Some of Banovich's fitness clients were executives with giant egos, Type-A personalities who had health issues. "They needed to make a change in their lives. They needed to get grounded in reality and tend to the things that really matter," he says, realizing that he, too, had to heed his own advice.

The pivotal year: 1993. At age 29, around the time that the upstart Banovich stunned many by

claiming best of show at the Pacific Rim Art Expo for a lioness painting titled, "In the Heat of the Day," he also sold his first big painting—a full-framed portrayal of an elephant, his trademark—for \$10,000 at the last Game Coin art exhibition in San Antonio. His big works created a sensation.

Steadily, one work at a time, he grew a global base of collectors while channeling portions of profits to wildlife conservation. This year at SCI, he is displaying a full range of large and small paintings—originals and high-quality giclées—in



RED DAWN





HIGH ROLLER

a space measuring 50 X 60—30 times the square footage of his booth 20 years ago.

"I like to paint big because most of my subjects have a larger than life mystique about them and SCI is an arena where that's appreciated."

NASCAR driver, SCI life member, and founder of a namesake driving team Richard Childress started collecting Banovich originals years ago and today he and his wife Judy have

several prominently displayed in their North Carolina home. "We always get compliments on the quality of John's work when people are visiting," Childress says. "They're so lifelike and detailed that it sometimes feels like they follow as you walk through a room."

Banovich's reputation indeed has put him in lofty company. There is perhaps no more harrowing example than that of Tom Siebel, a world-renowned computer software executive and philanthropist, who approached the artist to complete a special commission.

On Aug. 1, 2009, Siebel was in Tanzania on safari watching elephants when he and his guide were charged. Severely injured, Siebel saw his right leg impaled by a tusk, had his left leg crushed and suffered several broken ribs. He barely survived and his recovery led him into a period of introspection. Although a deeply private man, he opened up to filmmakers for a documentary that aired in autumn 2013 on the National Geographic Channel.

Siebel asked Banovich, who extensively researched the circumstances and worked with Siebel, to re-create the defining moment. The work, "Bad Day," was displayed at SCI-Reno in 2013 and hangs today in Siebel's California office. "He's a man who loves nature. He wanted to make sense of what happened and thought that a painting could speak to the experience in ways that words can't," Banovich says.

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### SCI's First Annual Miniature Show Features Works By Top Artists

Imagine the SCI floor spaces without the presence of fine collectable art.



**BRIAN JARVI**

Last year, as CEO Phil DeLone met with dozens of global artists whose paintings and sculptures are highlights for many attendees, he asked a question: "What can we do to make the experience richer for our members?"

Almost unanimously, the response was to create a new show that enables artists to more prominently display their work, offer collectors coming to Las Vegas a more attractive price point for securing sweet pieces of art to take home, and a feel-good way to generate money in support of SCI's vital programs.

DeLone's answer: Start SCI's first annual miniature show that features smaller-format works by some of the biggest names in sporting art. "Miniature shows have proven to be very popular among art collectors," DeLone says. "They generate excitement and give the spouses of our members an added attraction."

Featured are paintings, sculptures, limited edition photography and mixed-media works by Julia Rogers, Fred Boyer, Jaco Van Schalkwyck, John Banovich, Linda Besse, Brian Jarvi, Brandon Bailey, James Stroud, Laurel Barbieri, Kim Donaldson, T.D. Kelsey, Stephen Townley Bassett, Peter Stewart, Jan Martin McGuire, James Tandi, David Langmead, Kobus Moller, John Seerey-Lester, Lauren Bone, Joshua Spies, Maxine Bone, Cynthia Fisher, Eric Forlee, Trevor Swanson, James Hines, and John Tolmay. More works are expected to be added.

"For our inaugural year, the response has been tremendous," says SCI's Rob Holliday, among a panel of special guest curators who will also be giving out awards to the best pieces in the show. "If the quality of these works is any indication of what SCI members will find in the artist's booths at Mandalay Bay, apart from the miniature show itself, this Las Vegas convention will be memorable."



**J. VAN SCHALKWYCK**



**FRED BOYER**



**JAN MARTIN MCGUIRE**



**LINDA BESSE**

## Art of the Hunt

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BAD DAY

Banovich says SCI played a crucial role in the growth of his career. "In the beginning, I didn't have exclusive relationships with any agents and galleries. I had my booth at SCI and it taught me there is nothing more rewarding than the personal contact you have as an artist with your clients."

That contact has fueled almost three-dozen safaris in the African bush, often in the company of SCI collectors. Michael Meldman, founder and CEO of Discovery Land Company, fondly recalls how a conversation about art led to friendship and Meldman's first trip to Africa, chaperoned by Banovich.

"I wouldn't have wanted to be shown Africa by anyone besides John. Having the opportunity to see the land and wildlife with my family by someone so passionate was a-once-in-a-lifetime experience that I plan on doing every year. To have a custom painting of the experience makes the memory even more unforgettable," Meldman says.

Reflecting on Banovich's ethic, he adds, "The connection to each piece, along with his dedication to the protection and preservation of the wildlife and environment is truly spectacular. He is a true advocate for the protection and preservation of African wildlife and land."

Not long ago, the Yellowstone Club in Big Sky, Montana needed a work that would command a powerful presence over the mantle of its main lodge where residents from around the world gather. Sam Byrne, the founder of Cross Harbor Capitol, which owns the ultra-exclusive enclave, turned to Banovich. "Cold Air-Deep Powder" portrays a herd of bison stampeding through deep snow, an allusion to the kind of downhill ski terrain the club provides. "It's perfect," Byrne says. "I always had a vision of what a Banovich painting

would be like in this space and he executed it perfectly.”

Perhaps the most important transformation affecting Banovich over the last 20 years is that he got married to his wife, Amy, and became a father. It caused him to think more deeply about the kind of wild legacy his generation is leaving to the next. And it convinced him that, as a conservationist, there's no time to waste. Ecosystems, too, are like the human bodies of his fitness clients. In order to be healthy, all of the parts need to function, including predators and prey.

In 2007, Banovich received IRS approval to formally launch the Banovich Wildscapes Foundation. Banovich has seen the carnage of poaching, witnessed dwindling numbers of game animals in Africa, and watched ferocious debates erupt over whether species should be listed “What I do know is that whenever you bring hunters into the equation of problem solving, you make things better on the ground for animals you care about,” he says. “The North American model of conservation can work in Africa but you need to keep hunters in the picture, not take them out.”

That's why Banovich has supported and partnered with SCI and other hunter membership organizations. He's helping to raise millions of dollars for safeguarding lions in eastern Africa and aiding the survival of Siberian tigers in Russia. The initiatives, funded through the sales of his art, have focused on paying local people to become game guards, trying to help dollars generated by hunting trickle more effectively through communities on the edge of vital habitat, funding scientific research, teaching the value of co-existence and making the case for sportsmen and sportswomen to open up their wallets.

“John is truly one of the artistic masters of our time,” says collector Steve Chancellor, CEO of the American Patriot Group that does business around the world. “His work gets better with each passing day but he's much more than a wildlife artist.”

“If my art can bring enjoyment and be a positive, motivating force in people's lives, then I'm happy,” Banovich says. “And if it's hunters leading the way, then all the better.”

*Editor's Note: Todd Wilkinson has been writing about sporting art for more than 25 years. He is also author of the new book, “Last Stand: Ted Turner's Quest to Save a Troubled Planet.”*