

By David Light

John Banovich: *Big Animals, Big Teeth, Big Program*



Artist John Banovich began painting when he was seven years old with his sister, Teri, a talented artist. She started him off properly of course, in oils. Along with painting, he went into the woods hunting with his father, an avid gamesman. During this time he gained an intimate knowledge of animal anatomy while field dressing game and a patient, watchful eye, the hallmark of a great hunter, and, in this case, also a great artist.

Showing a marked talent for fine arts and an interest in nature, he later pursued dual degrees in biology and art. Unfortunately, or perhaps in his case fortunately, a commercial art career ended before it began and he continued pursuing the impetus of his true talent—big game. As Banovich shared during a recent interview with Open Fences, “My subject matter has always been big animals with big teeth. I believe each of us is given a specific path to follow on this planet...and when I finished school, it didn’t take long for it to become crystal clear I wanted to pursue fine art.” For John Banovich, this has sent him to wild places in search of wild spaces. It also marked the beginning of a successful career as an extremely respected wildlife artist.

Banovich believes that art has the power to inspire and has come to believe it is his job as an artist to “paint a face” on the animals and places worth conserving. His paintings invite people into the world he travels, with the intention of revealing the power and the magic of the wild world struggling to remain free in the inevitable combine of human expansion. Today, he passionately pursues not only his singular artistic process, but also conservation initiatives designed to protect the animals and places he loves to paint.

A normal day at the office for Banovich is hiking the mountains of Pakistan to study the snow leopard or traversing the Russian Far East on the trail of an Amur Tiger. He is not a point and click artist who shoots a roll of film, goes home and starts painting. “My understanding of the subject matter, the animal, the project, is

only the start of the process. I want to know what happens on the other side of the canvas, the story behind the painting,” explains Banovich. In his research, he absorbs the people and the culture of the places he travels then channels this understanding into his paintings, while capturing the animal’s energy in a seeming innocuous twitch of a tiger’s tail, the silent gaze of an interrupted gorilla, the studied indifference of a lion in repose.

It is exciting to look at a Banovich painting, not only for the fine brush strokes of realism, but also for his nuanced understanding of animal behavior and their interactions. The detail in which he captures moments, finite gestures and eye lines on canvas, are self-evident of long hours spent in the field studying and watching animals do what they do. The intense focus of his subject matter is so vital it reaches out and wraps mystery around the viewer’s heart, inviting the mind inside a different world filled with wild animals and wild places.

In his travels, Banovich is exposed to a wide variety of ecosystems, political nets and conservation organizations inside the territorial infrastructures of villages, people, places and cultures. Just as a boy he gained intimate knowledge of animal anatomy, today Banovich has gained an intimate knowledge of what is working and what is not working in the world of wild life and wild spaces conservation around the world. “What is the saying?” Banovich queries, “...There is a responsibility in knowing’...and I reached a point in my art and my travels where I knew I wanted to help.”

Driven by this desire to make a difference, five years ago Banovich formed the Banovich Wildscapes Foundation (BWF), which is designed with the primary initiative “to foster a cooperative relationship between the earth’s wild places and

the people that live there.” BWF utilizes practical hands-on restoration and preservation models promoting long-term conservation solutions un-biased by lobbied interests.

As an artist, he believes in the important role art plays connecting people to the landscape. Referentially, Banovich points to the pivotal role Thomas Moran played in the preservation of Yellowstone. Moran painted dramatic landscapes of the region, which captured the nation’s attention and inspired Congress to establish Yellowstone as the first national park. Banovich shrugs and says, “Our head moves us, but our heart inspires us...”

A person can read 2000 words about magnificent elephants and not be one tenth as moved as they are viewing a huge canvas of an enormous bull elephant throwing his massive head in the classic stance of a big male laying claim with all bluster and show. A single John Banovich canvas showcases a majestic world that thrills the blood and inspires the mind towards protecting one of these last, beautiful, wild things on this planet.

Banovich continues, “If you take the ‘wild’ out of wilderness, you have nothing...” In this day and age of politics and population growth, cityscapes and technical highways, the wild places could possibly be swept up in the momentum of progress without a concentrated effort to take a stance and lay claim to preservation.

The United States is a wealthy country and has the ability to subsidize national treasures and parks and protected areas. Poor nations, as Banovich has so often witnessed, do not have the same luxury of financial resource, which is where conservation organizations play a fundamental role.

“The best thing about BWF is that we do not make a living off our organization,” states Banovich. BWF has worked with “several different world-wide organizations with a successful history of bringing the non-hunting sportsmen conservationists together in a united effort.” BWF supports nine initiatives all together with three core initiatives including: the Mountain Nyla, Ethiopia, the Khunta Mi, Russia and P.R.I.D.E. Lions, Kenya and Tanzania. (P.R.I.D.E. representing Protection, Research, Implementation, Development and Education)

For Banovich, the critical question is always what is best for the species in the long term. Banovich’s number one goal in his art is to connect the painting to a landscape and let the story wander off the canvas and into the heart of the viewer, putting a face on issues for people to be inspired towards conservation and change—and ultimately—put Banovich Wildscapes Foundation out of business. If the animals and places were protected, there would be no good works left for BWF to provide. ★

www.wildscapesfoundation.com 