

# FOUR

LIFESTYLE • FINE DINING • TRAVEL • PROPERTY

# Anniversaries





# WILDS OF AFRICA

American artist, author and conservationist *John Banovich* creates spellbinding oil paintings that celebrate the beauty of African wildlife. Passionate about honouring and preserving these wild beasts, John's world-renowned works overflow with emotion and the trials and tribulations of the landscape.

## TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND AND WHAT LED YOU TO BECOME AN ARTIST...

I was born in 1964 in Lewistown, Montana and adopted at 13 days old by two of the most wonderful parents a person could ever ask for – John and Cass Banovich. With two other adopted siblings and one sister 10 years my senior, their biological child, we grew up in the rough and tumble mining town of Butte, Montana.

Mark Twain wrote in his diary, 'Butte, Mont. Aug. 1. Beautiful audience. Compact, intellectual and dressed in perfect taste. It surprised me to find this London-Parisian-New York audience out there in the mines.' That was Butte. A true paradox, rich in culture influenced by immigrants from 39 countries settling here to make a better life, a life crafted from their own hard-working hands. This mindset of self-reliance and 'out-of-the-box thinking' still exists today, and it has profoundly affected me to my core. Butte shaped my values, my work ethic and my appreciation for the wide-open spaces. Places that provide so much for so many hard-working, blue-collar families.

My early years were spent in those surrounding mountains hunting and fishing every chance I could with my father. He was my forest guide, my mentor, the best man I had ever known – my hero. But it was out there with the animals where I found my religion or spiritual centre.

OPPOSITE John Banovich's *Great White* oil painting on Belgian linen.

ABOVE Banovich in the studio with lion cubs painting his *Bahati Ya Kawinda* piece.

BELOW *Nakuru Pink Parade* oil painting on Belgian linen.

I have always been painting and drawing for as long as I can remember, and created my first oil painting from my favourite story of Rudyard Kipling's characters in *The Jungle Book*. There I was aged seven, sitting at our family's dining room table with my sister, trying to get the value and shading right on Baloo's belly. My parents were so incredibly supportive of my art from day one. They kept my material well full, providing the time and place and even purchasing my early works. What mother would allow a child to mix oil paint on her beautiful dark-oak dining-room »





ABOVE *Bahati Ya Kawinda* oil painting on Belgian linen.

« table every day? This was my father's idea of teaching me basic negotiation skills and how to find value in my work. I was painting nearly every day growing up. Art became not something I did: it became who I was and still am today. In many ways I guess I just never grew up.

**TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR ART PRACTICE...**

I am an artist first and a naturalist second. I can paint any subject but chose to dedicate my life to painting animals. Actually, better to say that animals chose me. I am also the luckiest guy in the world because every day I get to leap out of bed and do the thing that I love to do. I found my muse so many years ago, and after 47 years of painting animals in oil paint, I am just now starting to learn just a little bit about understanding my medium. But it's in the subjects of my work where I find my 'why' – my drive to get it right.

After 30 years of travelling the world's wildest places searching for these elusive big things with big teeth, I have come to learn a lot more about my subject by thousands of hours of interacting with it in the wild. It's during these wild sojourns I have come to deeply understand the threats that face it at the local, regional national and sometimes the international level.

The wild kingdom is harsh, can be a brutal place, and to suddenly come face to face with a male lion, for example, you know he has beaten the odds. He has arrived at this moment, his moment, a glorious and celebrated moment. This beast is the best of his kind, a survivor, and now I must honour that stature each day as I set out to capture him in paint. But in truth, the real threat to wildlife is not found in

their daily struggles. The biggest and growing threat to all beasts is man and what we call the human-animal conflict. This is the greatest challenge of our time.

**WHERE DOES THIS DEEP PASSION FOR WILDLIFE STEM FROM?**

I am not entirely sure where it all began, my deep fascination with the animal kingdom. But as far back as I can remember it has infiltrated every space of my conscious and unconscious mind. One experience stands out as perhaps igniting the flame. When my siblings and I were between six and nine years old, my parents took us to Disneyland and a place called Lion Country Safari, where a sign greeted you at the entrance warning 'No trespassers – violators will be eaten'. Now this was my kind of place. Within minutes of entering, lions clambered all over our rental car, and one big male plopped itself down across our hood. That image would never ever leave me. From that moment on, lions were in my blood and I was part of their pride.

**WHAT IMPRESSION DO YOU HOPE YOUR ARTWORK WILL LEAVE ON ITS AUDIENCE?**

I feel the reason I was put on this earth is perhaps to be their spokesperson and tell a wild animal's story. The real story, raw and unfiltered. I spend nearly a third of my time each year in the magnificence of the wild kingdom. Through my work I hope to move, reveal and inspire people to seek a deeper understanding of the world around us. I hope my art can paint a face on an issue, a cause, a species, and inspire someone to act in a positive way. ■