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DIVING /
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art

CASEY PARLETTE

IMITATES
life

WORDS
BETSY SANZ



BRONZE / ABALONE / TITANIUM
 STEEL / WOOD / MOTHER-OF-PEARL
 BRASS / STONE / CONCRETE

I**N 2006 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PUBLISHED** a now famous photograph looking down from the sky on native Amazonian tribesmen aiming arrows at the camera, presuming to take it down along with helicopter and crew. It is near unfathomable to think that such communities exist today. But Westerners haven't seen all there is to see of the Amazon, and apparently some of it is diveable. Casey Parlette discovered this to be the case back in 2004 when he visited Peru. What he planned to be a few weeks' visit to experience "the jungle" turned into nine months of expeditions deep into the Amazon with a goal of discovering a previously unidentified species of... something. Anything. As Casey penetrated high enough to reach the headwaters, he found stunningly blue, clear water and took to diving in search of never-classified fishes. He was glad he had spared room in his bag for snorkel and mask, two things that he couldn't fashion by hand in the depths of the jungle.

Fashioning by hand had been a matter of habit for Casey from childhood. While other kids (including yours truly) were wasting precious hours and brain cells in front of *Saved by the Bell*, if Casey wasn't in the water or in the hills, he was whittling. It was just something he did. Whittling wood into palm-sized frogs and fish to sell to willing adults; whittling while he worked his way through an anthropology degree at UCLA; whittling while he cared for his grandma; whittling on the floor of a girlfriend's dorm room on a visit to New York rather than venture too far into the wildlife-less concrete complications of the city.

With no formal artistic training, Casey didn't hold himself as an artist's artist; and with no esoteric collection of friends to tell him that what he was doing was exceptional, Casey continued to whittle because it suited him.

WHEN I WAS FIRST getting to know Casey, I once asked him how his day had been. He described how a couple of inexperienced boatmen had allowed their small yacht to nearly run aground in Laguna Beach. Before it reached the breakers and found itself ass over teakettle on Main Beach, Casey had to do something about it, as he was the only lifeguard immediately available. So he got his rope, swam to the boat, hooked on and started swimming it back out to sea,

singlehandedly clearing it of the most dangerous shallows by the time other lifeguards arrived to help him – the bewildered yachters watching from deck the entire time. I expressed shock at Casey's adventure, but he shrugged it off. It's actually a pretty common occurrence for lifeguards, and wealthy halfwit boatmen abound in this part of the world.

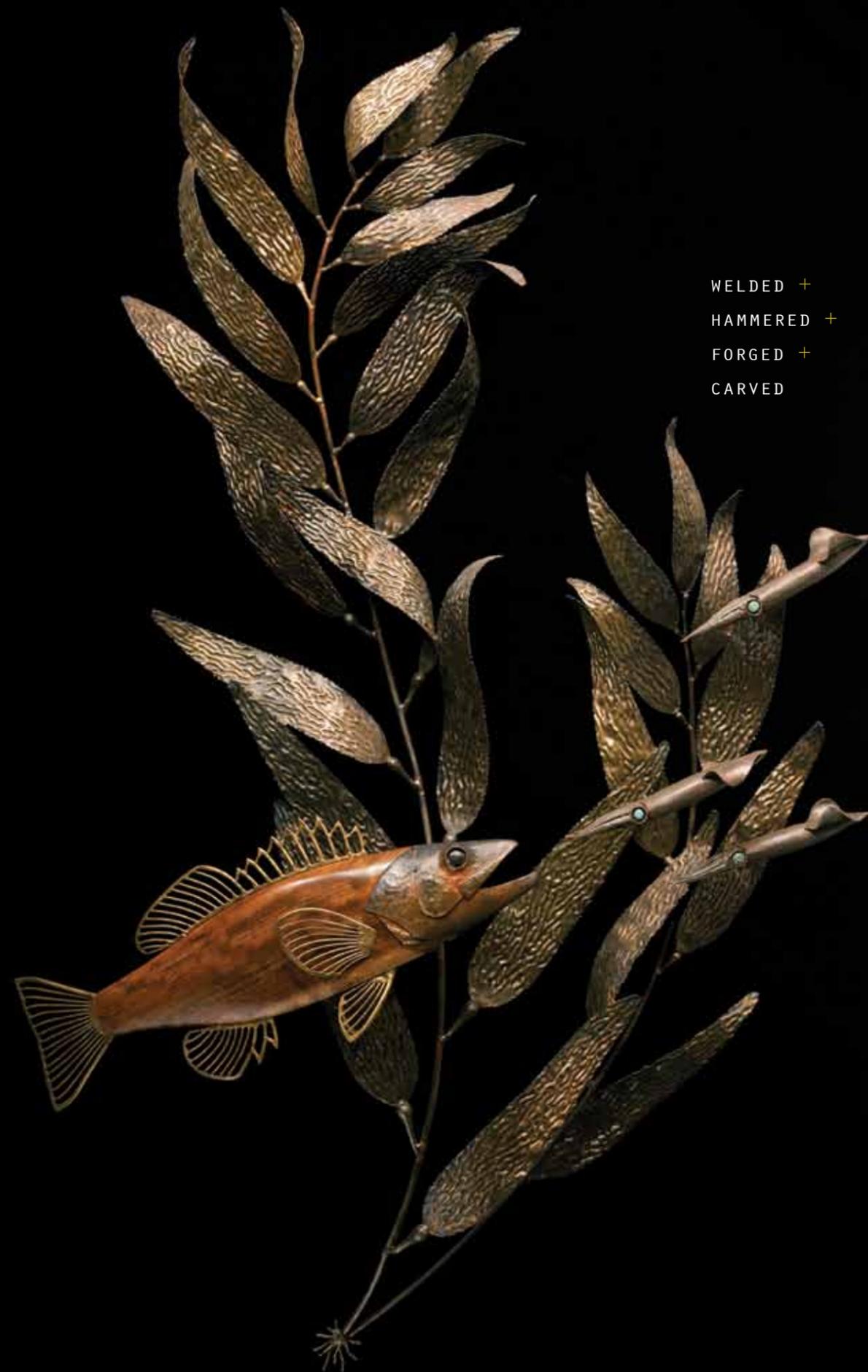
The point is: Casey Parlette spends a lot of time in the water.

While eking out a living during college, he supplemented his diet with speared fish and 7-10 pound lobster he would wrest by hand from watery nooks off the coast of Laguna Beach. After graduating he became a commercial diver doing underwater construction, and now he's a full time ocean lifeguard. When he takes vacation time it's to be an underwater cameraman for FOX Sports Fishing expeditions – usually the only diving crewmember chasing footage of 230-pound yellow fin tuna, 650-pound blue marlin, 70-pound ulua, and many others, as they are lured from the water in places like the Hannibal Bank in Pacific Panama, Fiji, Mazatlan, Baja, the Channel Islands, Costa Rica and all along the California coast.

E**VENTUALLY CASEY COMBINED** blacksmithing techniques with carved wood and turned the corner into formal sculpture. After a lifetime of observation within natural environments, and years of simply letting his curiosity have its way, he began rendering large-scale pieces where he translated his many experiences into art. His subjects are wildlife, primarily marine. >>>>



OPENING SPREAD » OCTOPUS / 27" x 10" _Single piece manzanita burl **PHOTO LEFT »** Casey with some bugs **RIGHT »** TROPIC / 58" x 40" _Bronze, steel, brass, shedua wood.



WELDED +
 HAMMERED +
 FORGED +
 CARVED



You could never characterize Casey as an abstract artist type. He doesn't try to twist the subject's nature to come up with some new self-congratulatory meaning. The animals are beautiful enough – and let's face it, weird enough – on their own. Still, his work shows an uncommon insight and perspective, which make his realist sculptures feel inventive. In order to portray the essence of his subject, Casey focuses on accurately rendering the quality of its motion: the unrolling of the octopus's tentacles, the ominous slinking of the hungry American alligator, the dung beetle's seemingly endless uphill struggle (in a piece Casey aptly titled "Life").

Casey's work celebrates the animal, but it also showcases the elements. Bronze, brass, steel, titanium, mother of pearl, abalone, stone, concrete and more are hammered, forged, carved and welded with a variety of woods that bring the subject to life. In fact, oftentimes it's the wood that gives the piece. The patterning of the grain might be reminiscent of the patterning of a fish's scale; the flow of the wood's growth might be redolent of a certain movement specific to an animal; the shape of a branch might simply reflect the natural shape of the future subject, and Casey goes with it. That was the case when a few years ago he was

taking a walk through his friend's San Diego ranch and stumbled across some cleared Manzanita burl wood. One felled branch in particular caught Casey's eye, its shape and flow reminded him of an octopus; back in his shop, that's what it became.

While in Peru, Casey met a Northern California couple, amateur naturalists like him, who were also bent on uncovering rarely seen flora and fauna. During those months Casey found a lot of interesting pieces of indigenous wood that were Amazonian scraps but North American rarities. His interest in the wood sparked that of his friends', and today that same couple has a business importing beautiful Amazonian wood varieties for use in custom guitars. Every trip to South America sees them bringing back odd specimens for Casey. In fact, all of Casey's friends bring him bizarre pieces of wood. His shop is full of the stuff.

IN 2008 CASEY WAS JURIED into the Laguna Beach Festival of Arts, the oldest annual fine art show in California, and it was about that time that his work began to garner a following. Collectors with a penchant for refined but rustic realism in wildlife art especially appreciate what Casey does. Squid, lobster, hermit crabs, piranha, anemones, anglerfishes and mackerel have all been captured by Casey in wood, metal and stone. A school of five wahoo in bronze, brass, stainless steel, curly maple and poplar spans eighteen feet across one collector's wall. The sculpting of a concrete and bronze nautilus is underway to serve as an outdoor fountainhead. A life-size tiger shark in curly red-

GO TO P.94
ABOVE » Casey in his workshop with another big piece **LEFT** » ANCIENT MARINER / 15" x 18" _Curly redwood, bronze, manzanita burl.

wood and hammered bronze will be installed in a client's home later this summer, fully suspended for a 360-degree perspective. "Trophic" – a sculpture nearly five feet high featuring a calico bass chasing squid through kelp – was recently acquired by Jay Riffe, of Riffe spear guns.

Land animals make appearances in Casey's work, too. Casey's time in the Amazon is still a source of inspiration to him. A high jungle valley where Casey spent many months was full of various orchids, some taller than him, some so small that the entire plant from bloom tips to roots would fit on a dime. Burl, bronze and abalone become Casey's earth, leaves and petals in his orchid sculptures. Last year a single piece of lemonade berry wood became a boa wrapped around a branch, in wait. He recently completed a piece made of yellow Amazonian quillo bordon and titanium. Well known to be very lightweight and strong, titanium also has a curious coloring property. When heated to certain temperatures it changes color permanently – from yellow all the way through the



spectrum of purples and blues. When Casey began experimenting with titanium, it wasn't a fish he envisioned as his subject, but a butterfly. One Amazonian expedition led Casey and company up a little traveled, roughly cut road where the salt on the ground attracted butterflies, which would abandon their meal when the threat of the slow going truck became real enough. They would float up, touch the windshield and swirl around the car as it passed. For hours, Casey and his friends drove through clouds and clouds of many colored butterflies.

MANY PEOPLE MAKE ART a full-time pursuit; so could Casey Parlette. But right now Casey's day job keeps him in the water pretty much daily. It makes you wonder if his art would be the same if it didn't. What happens when you take yourself out of the world that keeps your eyes open?

After diving in many Amazonian pools and deep river centers, Casey ended up finding a small fish in high, shallow ponds that had been isolated from the main river system by millennia of shifting earth. Even though he would eventually net his discovery there rather than spear it in a lagoon as he first expected to do, Casey was satisfied that he'd done what he had intended when he decided to remain in the Amazon. Once home, he sent his specimens off for evaluation and just this last December – more than seven years later – he got news that it was in fact a previously unidentified species. It has officially been classified as *rivulus parlettei*. I'm petitioning Casey to include it in one of his sculptures... perhaps it would make a tasty snack for a curly redwood tiger shark. **PAU**

