

COASTAL CREATIVITY

Laguna sculptor Casey Parlette finds inspiration in less-popular marine life, from ancient trilobites to hermit crabs and squid.

By Ashley Ryan | Photos by Dondee Quincena



Sculptor and jewelry maker Casey Parlette, pictured with one of his creations in his studio

From smooth wooden fish with metal fins and steel alligators set in concrete to blue titanium butterflies and an octopus with nearly 800 bronze washers for suction cups, it's hard to believe that Casey Parlette's sculptures aren't actually alive. Knowledgeably planned, meticulously crafted and virtually flawless when finished, his masterpieces depict some incredible yet underrated creatures.

The Laguna Beach native has ventured up and down the Southern California coastline, moving to San Diego with his family as a child and then back to town after high school. His experiences took him away again for a while, as he earned an anthropology degree at UCLA and searched for undiscovered fish species in the Peruvian Amazon. (Fun fact: He found one—the *Rivulus parlettei*, which was named after himself.) Now, two decades later, the sculptor extraordinaire and promising new jewelry maker is back in town, coming off the heels of a 22-year gig as a lifeguard for the city—a job that allowed him to further appreciate the animals he'd see day in and day out along the shore.

"Laguna's coastline is amazing, especially now that it's all protected," Parlette says. "I mean, the stuff that you see, you see bigger. Instead of seeing little lobsters, you're seeing big lobsters."

Local sea life continues to be one of the major inspirations behind his work, with "less-celebrated animals" often his favorite things to sculpt; think hermit crabs, anglerfish, squid and ancient trilobites. "I've always appreciated all of the weird little animals that most people kind of overlook, so that's probably why I tend to sculpt weird little animals," he says with a laugh. "... If presented in the right way, I think it can kind of open people's eyes as to how incredible these things are."

While Parlette's work is unique in more ways than one, the vast number of techniques he has mastered over the years is unparalleled. The son of a contractor, he created his first wildlife sculpture at the age of 7, carving a fish out of a discarded piece of wood. Now, despite having no formal artistic training, the use of techniques like hammering, carving, forging, welding and even heat tempering requires him to create his own tools in his Laguna Canyon workshop.

"Art is sort of a journey and you figure out your own course," he explains. "... You get bits and pieces from different people, and you see things that get you excited, and then you just kind of figure it out. My favorite aspect of sculpture is ... the problem-solving aspect. It's fun. It's engaging."

In addition to using numerous techniques, Parlette incorporates



Clockwise from left: a glimpse into the hourslong process of perfecting an octopus's suction cups; a snake on a branch that Parlette carved out of a piece of wood; hammering metal to reshape it while creating a piece of jewelry; one of Parlette's completed Seascape bracelets



many different materials into his works as well, including metal, wood, stone and concrete. "They all kind of have their pluses and minuses," he explains. "Wood has so much life to it. ... I definitely like to use the natural patterns in the woods—and textures—and incorporate that into the work. ... Same with stone. You know, stone has a life to it even though it was never alive. Metal's kind of lifeless when you start with it. It doesn't have a lot of personality necessarily, but that's why I like the blacksmithing. With all the hammering and the shaping and the bending—through that process, you can kind of hammer life into something that would otherwise be lifeless and cold."

When starting a new piece, Parlette says that he likes to have his course planned out with drawings and patterns, but it's not set in stone. "I kind of know the destination, but as I go, there's a lot of little subtle changes that add up to bigger changes along the way and, to me, that's what ... really brings the personality and life out of the piece. ... All the movement, all the life, happens through the sculpting process."

His current repertoire includes sculptures of all sizes, from tiny pieces to large-scale

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commissions that fill a massive space in a home or an office. Notable pieces include Lifted Spirits, an organ donor memorial for Mission Hospital in Mission Viejo featuring colorful butterflies, as well as the Strand of Life bench—with a bronze kelp seatback that represents a family tree—and Tide Pool Kraken octopus sculpture that sit on a bluff overlooking Laguna's own Divers Cove. He also exhibits his pieces at the local Festival of Arts, with this summer marking his 10th appearance in the last 11 years.

But in the autumn of 2017, he undertook a new challenge with the help of his wife, Gina Parlette, creating a company called Parlettei Jewelry to showcase a different side of his talent. Using leftover scraps from his sculpture work, Parlette makes titanium earrings, bracelets and necklaces that are inspired by nature. "I look at the jewelry as wearable sculpture," he says. "... At

certain temperatures, the titanium will actually change color. So you go through almost a full-spectrum color change, where you get greens and blues and pinks and golds." And, because it's titanium, it's resistant to corrosion and, after it cools, it's not reactive. "So, once you get those colors, it stays that way permanently," he adds. The jewelry is available online as well as locally at Hobie Surf Shop in downtown Laguna.

As Parlette continues on his journey, the only certainty is that wildlife will continue to influence his artistic sphere. "I've always been fascinated by nature. I have my concerns about the future for wildlife and wild areas, and I think that, to me, if I can have this work be a celebration of nature and maybe inspire people to be a little bit more interested in some of these different things, I think that's a valid mission," he notes. "That's part of why I choose some of the more obscure things [to sculpt]—because they have worth and they have value and they're important to the big picture. It's so easy to overlook some of these little things, but if you can take it and present it in a way where it's beautiful and where it's inspiring, who knows where that could lead."

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