



How one Laguna Beach lifeguard draws on his local roots and his time in the jungle to express [still] life in motion

By Betsy Sanz

In the age of the Internet, where unfettered access to just about everything has become a way of life, it is sometimes shocking to draw back the figurative curtain and be reminded that there are an untold number of discoveries still to be made on this planet of ours. There are still the vast oceans. There is still the jungle. It's unthinkable to realize that there are peoples in the Amazon who will launch arrows at your aircraft as you fly low over their land. It's awe-inspiring to think that there are species of animal not yet seen, not yet reported, not yet uploaded to Google Images. Most of us will bask in the wonder of such possibilities for a few moments, then quickly move on with our civilized day. For Laguna Beach lifeguard and emergent artist Casey Parlette, it's an unceasing wonder of the undiscovered and the rarely seen that drives him to create.

Laguna Beach is known for three things: art, nature and beach life. Casey Parlette is truly a product of his environment. He spent his youth in the hills, in the water and among the local wildlife, while his carpenter father taught him how to wield the tools of his trade and his sculptor uncle inspired him to capture what he saw around him. Since graduating from UCLA with a degree in Anthropology, Parlette has pursued a career in lifeguarding, breaks from which have seen him adventuring deep within the Amazon (where he lived for eight months), searching out undiscovered species of animal and

operating underwater cameras in exotic seas on behalf of FOX Sports. His adventures and studies have inspired and informed his art, which has been his constant.

"The job of a sculptor is to capture the essence of the way a subject moves," says Parlette when asked what inspires his subject choices. Motion is the motive. Sometimes the subject determines the material, sometimes the material determines the subject. For instance, one of his most well received pieces, Octopus, is an intricate rendering of an octopus carved out of a single piece of Manzanita burl wood. The segment of wood was immediately reminiscent to Parlette of the form of an octopus, its knotted grain suggestive of the nature of its movement, which Parlette describes as "unrolling". The process of revealing the octopus by carving was time-intensive and painstaking; the result was breathtaking and a leading factor in his selection to exhibit at the prestigious Laguna Beach Festival of Arts, which brings him back for the third time this summer.

For premier at this year's Festival of Arts (July 7 - August 31, 2010), Parlette is working on an alligator, made of steel and brass, as it moves through rippling concrete water, hunting.

"In the wild, when you see the alligator out of the water and sunbathing, that's nothing to worry about," says Parlette, who has seen his fair share of the somewhat night mare-rousing creature. more



*Wahoo in curly maple wood
with bronze, stainless steel
and saw blades for teeth*

Casey Parlette

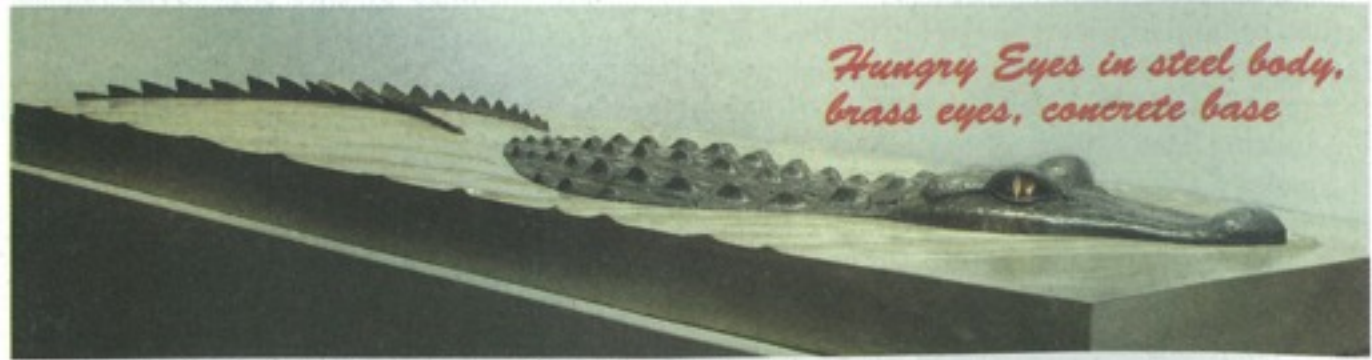
*Ancient Mariner
in curly redwood
and bronze*



*Octopus. Manzanita burl wood
single piece carving*



*Hungry Eyes in steel body,
brass eyes, concrete base*



"It's when you only see their eyes that they're really doing their thing. That's when you better watch out."

In this piece, titled *Hungry Eyes*, all you see is the dangerous view of the alligator.

Just a few years ago the 30-year-old was sculpting purely for the delight of it. He still does it for the joy, but today Parlette is producing some of Orange County's most technically fine and sought-after works of art. Showing his work on a large scale for the first time in 2008, he got great feedback but didn't sell much. Last year he sold the majority of his finished work (most of which are 4-6 months in the making) and secured three unique commissions.

This Spring he installed his latest commissioned piece – a 15-foot-wide wall-mounted school of five swimming Wahoo, the largest of which is over four feet long – in a private Laguna Beach residence. It has been a good year for the artist. Many would envy the demand he has had for his work. Still, Parlette is happy to remain a full-time lifeguard and has no plans to abandon his chosen career to dedicate all his time to his art.

"I would probably go crazy if I were in the studio all day," he says of his Laguna Canyon shop where he has space to create his sometimes massive sculptures. "As it is, I spend my days outdoors doing something I love – life guarding – and I spend most of my evenings in my studio doing something I love – sculpting. Why would I change it?"

Well, he might be able to produce and sell more art, for one thing. But while the money has been nice, Parlette doesn't believe he would be able to change the way he works to ramp up production. "I'm too particular.

There are details in my work that no one will notice but me. From a business standpoint, it's probably stupid, but it just has to be that way. I can't sacrifice the kind of art I do for the sake of the money."

Neither does he want to be pigeon-holed.

"I don't want to become 'that guy who does the fish that are wood and metal'. I want to grow and do the pieces that I want to see."

While most of his subjects have been marine animals, Parlette is equally as capable of expressing the anatomy and locomotion of landed fauna and flora. Last year he exhibited his piece titled *Life*, an ironwood carving of a dung beetle doing what it has done for millennia, rolling waste to stay in existence. It ended up being his most controversial piece, eliciting everything from "Ew!" to "Beautiful!"

This year Casey Parlette will show four or five pieces at the Laguna Beach Festival of Arts, which makes up much of his production over the last year. It's a work pace that pleases him. And when you consider the many years of study under the tutelage of Mother Nature that have granted his ability to render the living, moving reality of each subject, we could all agree that it's a pace that suits us, too.



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