

*When looking at the herd in “Heavy Drinkers of the Okavango,” that spans every size and position that elephants come in, or the convincing movement of the four wild dogs at spirited play in “After the Rains,” one cannot help but wonder, “Who is this artist, and how did he succeed so well in bringing us to Africa?” Or Africa to us.*

## John Banovich

# His Best Keeps Getting Better



Almost every artist's life story holds unexpected surprises, and world-famous wildlife artist John Banovich's is right up there. Born January 1964 and raised during the Seventies and Eighties in the copper mining town of Butte, Montana, he completed his first wildlife art works at age seven: *The Jungle Book Characters*, basing some of his drawings on animals his father brought home from the hunt.

Intending to study zoology and art at the University of Montana, the focus on abstract art in the faculty there incited him

to move to Seattle instead where he received a degree in graphic design from the Art Institute in 1987. But he was already a successful personal trainer, competitive body builder and power lifter when he submitted his first work – a miniature of two lionesses – to the 1993 Pacific Rim Wildlife Art Show – and won “Best of Show.” In the 12 years since, John's career has skyrocketed with an energy and height rarely experienced by the most gifted and productive artists over a period of 30 years. In fact, the movie star-handsome, 40-year-old artist has sold nearly every oil painting that he has done.

John is right at the top in terms of success as an artist, publisher, printer, businessman

and entrepreneur. A lot of this has to do with the control he maintains over his material, control that often also results in his spearheading the very efforts to conserve that species, like the tigers in the Russian Far East. Luckily for his viewers, some of the most unique and interesting animals in the world to paint are also the most endangered, which compels John to spend long blocks of time in one wilderness or another, from one end of the earth to another.

Control over his artistic empire means *Banovich Fine Art Editions*. Contrary to artists who are limited by restrictions imposed by wildlife art print publishers, who go so far as to crop originals to fit within the standard shipping sizes, Banovich decides which images to paint and when, and in what dimensions; which images to reproduce and publish, in which numbers, and using which printing techniques and framing methods, as well as the marketing of his work. “I don't want to paint for the market, I want to paint for me!”

Control extends to his choice of conservation and humanitarian works to support through his own foundation, *The Banovich Nature Fund*. In Africa, he has assisted *The Boteti River Project* to drill boreholes in the riverbed that had been dry for 10 years, while herds of migrating wildlife are blocked from their natural water sources by game fences, resulting in a disaster for wildlife beyond description. Now, the animals that cannot migrate have a source of water in an area where they are traditionally present.

A hunter himself, he not only exhibits at hunting conventions like SCI, he supports several of their programmes, as well as PH

Robin Hurt's *Cullman and Hurt Foundation* anti-poaching efforts in Tanzania.

John's fund-raising methods to support conservation are fantastic and infallible. Through his art, he hopes to move, reveal, and inspire people to seek a deeper understanding of the world around us and bring together groups of individuals to unite on a common ground. Take his original oil painting, *Man-Eaters of Tsavo*, which recently sold at SCI for a substantial sum, along with 25 canvas giclée reproductions that sold out for some \$6,000 apiece. In a combined effort with the owner of the original painting, founder of *The Chancellor International Wildlife Foundation*, the proceeds from a special edition of 10 of

this original have been designated to support various foundation projects: one has already sold for \$25,000.

With each new giclée canvas release, *Banovich Fine Art Editions* produces a separate “Foundation Edition” limited to two signed and numbered canvases, like *Eden*, and made available to a variety of organizations to help finance their conservation and humanitarian efforts. John also does not hesitate to ask the owner of one of his originals if he can publish reproductions of it in order to raise money for the organizations he personally supports. It's an all-win situation.

Not only does the canvas of his reproductions have the same thread count as the original, not only are the stretcher bars of the same high quality as his originals, Banovich's reproductions are true to the relative size of its original because “the artist's composition has as much to do with the painting's, or the print's, success or failure as the subject itself.”

Banovich's output is prodigal, and his evolution as an artist – especially his increasingly daring compositions – is in fast-forward. “I'm more spontaneous now. I paint with more confidence. I better understand the use of color.”

What took him three months to complete seven years ago now takes him three weeks, and he is capable of working 18 hours a day in his stunning 1,800-square-foot studio with 35-foot high ceilings in Livingston, Montana (a quick drive from Yellowstone Park) that serves as work and exhibition space for his notoriously huge canvases, as a location to host fundraisers for the conservation groups he supports, and as a place to crash during his “Terminator”



“Under the Baobab”

phases of productivity.

Although his subject matter is unlimited, from his first safari to Botswana’s Okavango, “Africa moved me beyond words. I wanted to soak it up – every last drop. Its enormous diversity, extreme beasts and ancient rhythms ignited a fire in my soul and I knew I would never be the same.” One imagines that the large scale of his work, like the big 74”x94” *Big Ivory*, is part of his communicating the sense of grandness and the grand scale of the continent as he experiences it.

John does not have a fixed formula in placing an animal – through composition – in its environment. Sometimes the animal is everything, like the hippo in *Confrontation*: the soft edges of the background are intended to lead the eye back to the subject. In *Headdress*, the Cape buffalo is so big, too big to be contained within the canvas.

But there is also the overwhelming lush, wet forest of the Virguna volcano region in *Fleeing Rwanda*, and every nook-and-cranny of the meticulously painted rocks in *First Light*. Joe Vance, President Emeritus of Society of Animal Artists, has this to say about John’s work: “John is equally adept at creating beautifully composed landscapes with vivid color and strong lighting or subtly toned portraits where the structural features of the animal itself provide the compositional components of the painting.”

Much of Banovich’s work tells a story, and the body language and position of the animals on the canvas are part of the narrative line of the tale. The hyenas in *Pirates of the Plains* are orchestrated as if you were encountering a gang of street thugs in the movies.

When asked about his advice to other wildlife artists, he says the first task is to see

the subject first-hand and study it inside out. “Then pull it all together and work on your painting in the knowledge that you know all there is to know about the subject. This will produce a work full of confidence that will be seen by the viewer.” He adds “you also have to be willing to accept that you might not find a buyer for what you want to do.”

He emphasizes the importance of the animal’s environment. “You must understand the animal’s habitat to get to its essence. The more information you have, the more effective your story will be.”

John’s stories on canvas will continue to bring increasingly urgent messages about the future of our planet’s wildlife heritage. “The human and animal conflict is raging on and escalating to the point where the decisions we make today will seal the fate of wildlife for generations to come.” B.CL