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Watching You, Watching Me, oil, 20 x 30"

John Banovich: A Multifaceted Artist, Businessman, Conservationist, Philosopher

BY MICHAEL SCOTT-BLAIR



It was 3 o'clock in the morning and pouring rain when John Banovich slipped in a mud-filled ditch. "I sat there on my rump, covered in mud, with the rain pouring down my face, and I remember thinking to myself, 'If I give everything I have to everything I do, I will be successful in anything I attempt in my life.'" It's not the kind of philosophical introspection most people are given to while sitting in a mud-filled ditch at 3 a.m., but it is the kind of single-minded, focused determination that has taken Banovich from being a disenchanted competitive bodybuilder and personal fitness trainer to being an internationally sought-after wildlife artist and passionate conservationist.

By way of explanation—and you're probably wondering—Banovich had bought an investment property while living in Seattle, and between his painting and physical training commitments, the early morning hours were the only time he could work on house improvements. He was digging the ditch for a drain and trying to shore up the sides when he took the tumble in the mud. But in Banovich's world, no event is too small or meaningless for his ever-active mind not to squeeze the last drop of learning from it.

In his delightfully rustic studio in Montana's Paradise Valley, just 35 miles north of Yellowstone National Park, Banovich reflected on the first oil painting he ever did, sitting on his sister's knee at his mother's kitchen table in his hometown of Butte, Mont., a small community built around enormous copper mining operations. "My grandfather came from Yugoslavia to work in the mines and my father worked there, too. Butte is a very tough town, but it is like one big family—everyone looks out for everyone else.

"My sister was a very good painter and, with the support of my mother, she introduced me to oils at age 7. She enrolled me in adult art classes where I got a lot of attention and accolades if I did well, which is great for a kid of 10 or 11. I sold my first oil painting to a nonfamily member—that's an important distinction—family members don't count at age 10," says Banovich, who just turned 42 and recently completed a truly monumental 10-foot-by-10-foot painting of an elephant charging head-on.

No Fan of Abstract Art

His talent for art took him to the University of Montana, but only for a year. "There was a strong push toward modern abstract painting and I was very disenchanted with it. Not



Photo by Michael Scott Blair

John Banovich and his dog, Truckee, take a break outside of the artist's studio in Montana's Paradise Valley.

only was there little or no support for realism, but it was not considered true art and was tagged as fur-and-feather illustration. Still is today in some circles. Of course, that is ridiculous when you remember that many of the finest artists in history have been realists. But fortunately, the art studio was left open at night and I could go in there and paint my bears and elk and moose."

Banovich was studying a double major of art and zoology, and though he did not know it at the time, when he finally switched to wildlife art as a career, his knowledge of zoology would serve him well. But at the time he was torn between the two. "I was debating—do I want to be a zoologist or not? But I learned that zoologists don't make much money, which left me the choice between being a starving artist or a starving zoologist, neither of which was very appealing to me.

"You know, it's amazing when you look back and see the points in your life when significant new directions emerge. I had just started serious power (weight) training and bodybuilding and was thinking of turning professional," he said with a reflective chuckle. "Maybe I figured I'd be the Arnold Schwarzenegger of Butte, Montana."

Banovich went back to college, got a degree as a health fitness specialist and passed the American College of Sports Medicine exam. "When I focus my sights on something, I become very obsessive about it. I satiate it. It's a good thing really, because when you turn the page to something new, you never have to go back and revisit that endeavor—you have squeezed everything out of it." And the time came to turn the page. As usual, he gave the bodybuilding everything he had. "I worked extremely hard. I did everything I possibly could—and I came in fourth. In effect, I lost," says Banovich, even though he built a successful personal training business when that idea was in its infancy.

Chooses Fine Art

While living in Seattle for both his fitness training and his degree from the Art Institute of Seattle, Banovich completed his portfolio to become a commercial artist, "but I knew that was not what I wanted to be. I went for my first job interview and told the man he should not hire me because I didn't want to be a commercial artist. He didn't hire me, but he thanked me for my honesty. I knew right then that my heart was set on being a fine artist."

"And when John sets his heart on something, he will do it—he is a perfectionist," says Dennis Harrington, a fellow competitive bodybuilder and Seattle institute student, who also grew up in Butte and is now a sculptor and the owner of Planet Bronze Art Gallery in Bozeman, Mont.

Banovich's next move was to take control of his art. "I wanted to get away



Face to Face, oil, 9 x 12"



Great White Hunter, oil, 52 x 72"

*"There is no great nobility in creating an incredible painting...
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caused people to think and realize how important wildlife is."*

— John Banovich

from doing commissions. I knew that true art comes from the soul. True creativity lies in doing exactly what you want to create. I took some commissions early on; you have to in order to pay the bills, but I did not want to be seduced by the good and steady cash flow that commissions can generate." Like virtually all art students, Banovich left college with a knowledge of painting but no knowledge about how to make a living in art.

"I needed some guidance so I called wildlife artist Lee Kromschroeder in Escondido, Calif., and asked if I could fly down and take 30 minutes of his time. He graciously agreed. I arrived knowing very little, but after three and a half hours with Lee, I left imbued with his enthusiasm and some tools—enthusiasm and tools that over the next few years I was able to build into a rocket ship that took off, is still flying, and hopefully, will fly for a long time into the future," says Banovich.

(After reading Banovich's words while attending a recent show, Kromschroeder recalled the meeting with the then young Banovich. "It's most kind of John to remember that visit. And," Kromschroeder added with a rueful smile, "maybe I should have paid more attention to what I was saying.")

Successful First Show

Banovich had saved some money from his personal training business and entered his first art show (the former Pacific Rim show) in 1993. "I decided to take some risks, to try and stand



Inside the Red Zone, oil, 40 x 50"

out a little, be different. First, my main piece was small—only 8-by-10 inches—and second, it was an African scene at a time when nobody was doing African scenes—two strikes against me." He was stunned when it won Best of Show. "I had another, larger piece that was also an African scene, but that had an extra strike against it—it was a kill scene and nobody collected kill scenes. It was risky and I was frightened. That kill



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scene represented half of my potential earnings from the show and I had to sell it. I had put a price of \$4,800 on it, which was like \$4.8 million to me at that time.

"The next morning I was up early, tidying up my booth, making sure my Best of Show ribbon was straight, when I saw this man looking at my paintings. It was so early that I figured he was a janitor or something. He asked how much the painting was but I could not remember the exact price. He walked away and I imagined he was going to vacuum the carpets. He came back that afternoon. He said he had walked the entire show and my work was the strongest. I thanked him, and then he said, 'By the way, I've bought both pieces.' I later learned that he was one of the biggest collectors of wildlife art in Europe and he had just flown in on his private jet. That day I also learned to never, ever, prejudge anyone. It will come back to bite you, and I never have again."

It was that same year (1993) that Banovich first went to Africa. He has since been there 15 times, not counting his wedding there in December. "It was Walt Disney's films that got me hooked on exotic animals, especially those in Africa, which has the greatest share of exotic animals on any continent. Television fed us a diet of Disney films with exotic animals with anthropomorphic (human-like) qualities that we could all relate to."

But the artist's attention to detail goes way beyond Disney. Banovich was doing a life-size pair of lions in the rampant position, similar to those seen on medieval European heraldry. "But in talking to lion tamers, I found that lions cannot stand up on their hind legs. They can walk on two legs, as they do in circus acts, but in order to stand still, there must be a third point of balance, which is usually the tail," he says. As a result, his standing lions always have one leg advanced in the walking

position, or the tail is down. Most people might not notice, but to Banovich, to have only two points of balance would be a gross and unacceptable error.

The Art of Good Marketing

Though Banovich stresses that he has no business background, he is acknowledged as among the most successful artist/businessmen. "I have little patience with artists who say they don't like to sell or be in galleries or whatever it might be they don't like about the business side. I say, get over it. In order to do the best work you can create, you need to have the best materials, go to the places with the best subject matter, use the best frames, and be free to do your best work—all that takes money. Get used to the idea that making money is part of the creative process. You may not like it; you may not enjoy it, but get on with it. It's not a prostitution of your creative self. Good marketing is simply one of the tools we use to become the best artist we can be," says Banovich, who has taught classes on the business side of being an artist, and says there is a "great hunger" for that knowledge in the artist's world.

"It is a matter of how much discomfort you can tolerate. You may be blessed with great talent, but that will only take you so far. I don't care if you are a writer, an artist, a bank robber or a mechanic, your success in life will be in proportion to your ability to tolerate discomfort," he says.

For too many artists, the finished piece of work is the end of the process, says Banovich. "For me, it is just the beginning. The purpose of doing a piece of art is to sell it and make money. It is what you then do with the money that is important. You pay your bills, reward your staff and your team, maybe buy yourself

United We Stand, oil, 20 x 75"





Long-legged Beauties, oil, 18 x 32"

some little thing, and the rest goes to your mission—that is the important thing, that is what you should be remembered for," says Banovich, who is not interested in being remembered as an artist.

"The art must accomplish something beyond its mere existence," says Banovich. "The art is not the objective. For me, it is a vehicle, and the destination of that vehicle is to leave a greater appreciation for wild things and wild places, to share the drama and the magic of the natural world. There is no great nobility


in creating an incredible painting. My question is, now what are you going to do with that incredible painting that will result in something of REAL value? If I am going to be remembered for anything, it is just as a person who caused people to think and realize how important wildlife is." That has become the mission for him personally and for the fund that carries his name.

Banovich has a flare for the dramatic as he pursues wider support for his many conservation efforts, including a joint effort with the Wildlife Conservation Society to save the



Daga Boys & Baobab, oil, 36 x 27"

Siberian (Amur) tiger on the east coast of Russia, its last habitat. He recently gave a dinner in his studio for 60 guests and just before the dessert was served, he rose to say that someone had just arrived who had a lot of knowledge about the tiger and he would like to introduce him. In walked a 400-pound male Siberian tiger and, says Banovich, the Siberian tiger suddenly had a very real and personal meaning to those 60 guests.

Now, he is joining with two other international wildlife artists—Daniel Smith, also of Montana, and Kobus Möller of South Africa—and the three will work on a single canvas depicting three big cats—a lion (Banovich), cheetah (Smith) and a leopard (Möller). The work will reflect the distinctive styles of the three artists, but the palettes will blend into a single work that is being auctioned at this year's Safari Club International show in Reno, Nev. "We got the idea from the three tenors who combined to create something greater than each of them as individuals. It is this kind of innovative thinking that helps expand public awareness for conservation," says Banovich. "We got the idea while eating peanuts in the bar at New York's Waldorf Astoria." 



Images courtesy of the artist, unless otherwise noted.

Gathering of the Herd, oil, 10 x 32"



CONSERVATION CONNECTION

Artist John Banovich has worked with several different worldwide organizations that have been successful in bringing the nonhunting conservation community and sportsmen conservationists together in united efforts to benefit the wildlife and the people who live in wild places. His Banovich Wildscape Fund also strives to promote scientific research and conservation education and to facilitate habitat protection and restoration.

Here are a few of the fund's specific projects that have been aided by donated paintings, proceeds from sales of art or direct financial support.

- The Honorary Wildlife Warden Network, run by the Wildlife Protection Society of India, provides support and information for authorities attempting to combat poaching and escalating illegal wildlife trade—particularly in wild tigers.
- "Connecting the Dots—Restoring the Great Bear" is part of the Natural Resource Defense Council's efforts to change current policies that relegate the grizzly to roughly 1,000 animals in fragmented habitats in North America.
- "P.R.I.D.E.—African Lion Initiative" is part of the African Wildlife Foundation's attempts to conserve lion populations outside of protected areas in Africa.

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