

A photograph of sculptor Kent Ullberg, an older man with a white beard and glasses, wearing a blue and white plaid shirt and light blue jeans. He is standing in front of a large, dynamic bronze sculpture of a flock of Canada geese in flight. The geese are spread out across the frame, with some in the foreground and others higher up. The background shows a multi-story building with windows and some greenery.

Kent Ullberg's Omaha Project: His Magnum Opus Is Complete

Sculptor Kent Ullberg stands in front of a fountain in Omaha's Wilderness Park with a flock of larger-than-life bronze Canada geese he created as part of a seven-year project called *Spirit of Nebraska's Wilderness*. It starts in Pioneer Courage Park, where a wagon train stampedes a herd of bronze bison, which flush a flock of geese. With eight bison and 58 geese spread out over six blocks, it is the world's largest wildlife installation, and was just completed in August with the placement of the last bison.

Kent Ullberg is talking about his rich experience in the arts, his broad experience in the world and his formative experience with his family, whose well of creativity was as fathomless as the sea that borders the wildlife sculptor's native Sweden. It is a mesmerizing recital and all the more an exercise in concentration since, at the time, the only other towering presence in Ullberg's Loveland, Colo., studio is a 19-foot clay elephant.

"I'm trying to ignore the elephant in the middle of the room," Ullberg says about the outsize animal slated to be cast in bronze and installed next spring at an entrance to the St. Louis Zoo. The elephant is one of a long line of large-scale sculptures-cum-public commissions that Ullberg has produced in the past three decades, a period that has brought him the personal achievement and world renown he envisioned, but could not attain, as a young student of art in 1960s Stockholm.

Today, Ullberg's reputation is as monumental as the sculptures he shapes at his studios, in Colorado and on Padre Island in Corpus Christi, Texas. His wildlife creations, from bison to bears, from dolphins to dinosaurs, arc above fountains, preside before buildings or thunder through the streets from Omaha, Neb., to Cape Town, South Africa. His work has been on display at such blue-chip institutions as the Exhibition Hall in Beijing, the Salon d'Automne in Paris and the National Geographic Society in Washington, D.C., and his name is stamped on a gallery inaugurated in 2006 by the Art Museum of South Texas. Along the way, he has been honored by his peers and saluted by academicians, and his array of awards—from the 1975 Barnett Prize for sculpture from the National Academy of Design to the 1996 Rungius Medal from the National Museum of Wildlife Art—are as prestigious as they are numerous.

Son of Seafaring Swedes

If Ullberg, 62, sets the standard for wildlife sculptors, then he raises an equivalent high bar for living, and that explains why he is all artist and part adventurer. He signed on with the Swedish merchant marine in advance of art school, and before turning to sculpting full time, he was a big-game guide in Africa. Raised by artist parents and maternal grandparents, who lived in a remote fishing village on the west coast of Sweden on the North Sea, Ullberg's childhood was a study in extremes. He is the natural son of seafaring folk whose lives, like the tides, were ever in motion.

"That is really where I developed that closeness to nature; it's where all of my

fascination with nature started," he says. It is a story of dark and light—cold, long winters and sun-soaked summers—and even today, as improbable as it seems, the sense emerges of an inquisitive extrovert blossoming amidst physical and social isolation.

Ullberg's mother was an art student who worked as a waitress between semesters and it was during a summer hiatus that she met—and later married—"this crazy young musician" who would father Kent Ullberg. "She got bloody pregnant—and it was me," says Ullberg. "She wanted to continue her art education so I was not particularly welcome, and until I was 1 or 2, she continued her studies in fine art."

A textile artist, Ullberg's mother wove while her toddler son crouched beneath the sheltering loom. "The loom would scoot along the floor, so they put old tennis shoes on its legs," he recalls.



Kent Ullberg has just finished this clay model of his latest monumental piece, *Reaching Elephant* (19 x 19 x 4½'), which will be installed next spring at an entrance to the St. Louis Zoo. "I'm excited that the elephant is going to be placed next to a living tree," Ullberg says, "so it will be interacting with the tree and forever changing."



The Omaha project ends with the geese, which have now become stainless steel, flying into the atrium of the 40-story First National Tower. The building is the corporate headquarters for First National Bank of Omaha, which commissioned the multimillion-dollar work.

"It was like sitting under a big person, a big extension of my mom; there was security under there." It was not until years later that Ullberg learned that his mother had toted her unborn son to sculpture classes and even produced a clay study of his tiny right hand. When she died at age 60, Ullberg returned to her weaving studio to bid her a final farewell. There he discovered the diaries that spelled out her hopes, dreams and fears. "One of them told about taking sculpture classes and it talked about the clay hand. I found it in the bottom of a trunk," says Ullberg.

The writings and the clay model are posthumous proof of the scope of his mother's artistic aspirations, many of which Ullberg has fulfilled in his lifetime. He believes a kind of genetic memory triggered his early love of sculpting. A budding painter, he enrolled in a sculpture class at Stockholm's Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design chiefly to round out his curriculum. What he gained was much more than mere credits. "When I got

my hands in clay, I fell in love with it," he says.

Seeking to marry his two loves, sculpting and nature, Ullberg began producing wildlife pieces in art school. In an era that worshipped abstract expressionism, Ullberg's heterodoxy did not go without note. "Not only were you not really supposed to do realism, you weren't supposed to do stuff that looked like anything—and certainly not wildlife," he says. "My teacher—a wonderful man who really worried about students and was really very kind—took me aside and said, 'Look, why are you doing this? This is archaic; this is not the language of our time. And you'll never make a living doing animal sculpture.'"

Tell that to the Broward Convention Center in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., which commissioned Ullberg to produce a 150-foot-by-36-foot fountain featuring a sailfish in three stages of ascension. Or mention it in passing to the First National Bank of Omaha, whose family owners underwrote the blocks-long bronze procession of Canada geese and bison—*Spirit of Nebraska's Wilderness*—which Ullberg considers his magnum opus. A masterwork of artistic and technical skill, the project as designed was just completed in August with the installation of the last of eight bison.

Bison Trek Down City Streets

It took Ullberg seven years to place the finishing touches on his work in the heart of downtown Omaha. The larger-than-life bison herd begins its trek through the city center on a street corner at Pioneer Courage Park. In their six-block journey, the animals gallop down the sidewalk, into a





The stampeding herd of larger-than-life bronze bison runs down Omaha's sidewalks, ripping through planters and even a building. The bison in the park are headed toward the flock of geese, to flush them out of the fountain. "The bison ran here on the open plains for centuries," Ullberg says. "Their spirits are still with us today, paying no heed to our modern cities and structures."





When night falls, the city's lights produce rich tones that accentuate the details of Ullberg's magnificent work.

planter, out of a planter, through a building and across a road. Veering fountainside in newly developed Wilderness Park, the bison flush the geese, which lift from the water and wing—all 58 strong—across the urban landscape to the bank. Like the financial institution, established at the dawn of the city's founding, the sculpture serves as a bridge between historical and modern-day Omaha, a dual testimony to the region's deep past and its promising future.

"Conceptually, when humans entered the wilderness, they disturbed wildlife and this is a symbol: We are displacing the bison and the geese and the animals are running," says Ullberg. "In a way, they have returned to their native habitat but now there is a bank in the middle of it. That's why it is called the 'spirit' of the Nebraska wilderness. The spirits remain with us; they don't care if buildings are in the way."

The metaphor Ullberg employs to illustrate the flight of the geese from the industrial age to the information age is stainless steel, the metal of modernity. "As the geese leave the fountain and begin to interact with contemporary buildings and architecture, they begin to combine bronze and stainless steel until the geese entering the bank are all highly polished stainless steel," he says.

Like leading wildlife sculptors Ken Bunn, Forest Hart, Tim Shinabarger and Mick Doellinger, Ullberg is a taxidermist by training. That skill opened a career course for him in 1967, when

he was hired by a safari and taxidermy company in Botswana. "I got to live my boyhood dream there," he says. Befriended by the Botswanan director of wildlife and parks, Ullberg was asked to help launch the nation's first museum dedicated to art and natural history. As curator, Ullberg led hunts designed to collect animals for the developing institution. He shot animals and skinned them; he labored over exacting measurements, took copious notes and produced countless field sketches—all talents that would lay the foundation for his sculptures. Taking a page from Ernest Hemingway, Ullberg believes knowledge informs artwork and lends it power.

"It's my personal philosophy, and not everyone may subscribe to it, that I do not sculpt anything I have not experienced and preferably nothing I haven't dissected," says Ullberg, a zoologist





Specially designed, reinforced traffic light poles were used to bear the weight of Ullberg's bronze geese.



The geese travel down city streets, attached to buildings, light poles and traffic lights.



by interest. "Until I've looked at the bones and the muscles, I know nothing. I want maximum knowledge, maximum exposure. It is only after you have engaged in in-depth research, when you really know your topic, that you can take liberties. Then when you take liberties, you come from a point of knowledge."

At a time when the sport of hunting draws mixed reviews, Ullberg imparts an ethos that maintains possession is nine-tenths of love. "To capture the essence, the soul, the power of the animal, you have to have absorbed it first, you have to have lived it," he says. "If it's something you love, you want to own it, you want to possess it." Ullberg adds, "I don't kill animals anymore. I don't need to; I've done it. I have sketchbooks full of measurements."

Ullberg's assiduous gathering of data—only to depart from



Even a building cannot stop this stampeding bronze bison.



its dictates—may account for the rave reviews that have characterized his career. Announcing a 2005 Ullberg retrospective at the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson, Wyo., Curator Adam Harris said, “Ullberg’s sculptures are first and foremost works of fine art; they have grace, balance, poise and personality.” If Ullberg’s other admirers occasionally find themselves at a loss for words, it is perhaps a reflection of the awe his works invariably inspire. Steve Boody, owner of a St. Louis-based firm that assembles art collections for corporations, coordinated the First National Bank project in Omaha. He exhausted his supply of superlatives in attempting to articulate his experience with Ullberg. “You cannot get any better,” says Boody. “Kent is a consummate professional of the highest intellect and capability.”

By the time Ullberg emigrated from Africa to America in 1974 at the invitation of the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, the art world was poised for a major shift in the

aesthetic, moving from modernism to postmodernism. For the first time in decades, artists were applauded for incorporating traditional references instead of disavowing them. The pairing of postmodernism with a nascent nature movement renewed interest in wildlife art and elevated the standing of artists such as Ullberg, who muses, “I have always felt born at the wrong time and that I live at the wrong time—a traditional person in contemporary times.” And an amplified conservation ethic tied man’s fate to the fate of other living creatures. “Nature’s images are imbued with an iconographic power,” Ullberg observes. “We associate them with our own survival. We now realize we are not immune to the environment—it’s not, ‘so a few animals die, who cares?’—and that our destinies are intertwined.”

Chooses Commissions Carefully

Ullberg finds himself in the enviable position of being able to turn down commissions—which he has done. While he is far from a misanthrope, he says he is sometimes petitioned to produce sculptures that glorify human beings, and he routinely declines those opportunities. “I only have so many sculptures in me and only so much time left,” he says pensively.

But time stands still for the instinctive chronicler, who is captivated by both the living and the dead. *Halcyon*, a small-



Halcyon (bronze, 20 x 8 x 8")

scale bronze, is based on a belted kingfisher that floated by one day, lifeless, when Ullberg was boating off Padre Island. Examining the bird in his hand, Ullberg traced the creature’s elegant bill, brushed the miniature feathers surrounding its eyes. “It is beautiful, beautiful; I see God in the eye of a dead bird,” he says. “Here in death, I want to chronicle him.”

With monumental and tabletop bronzes on display across the United States and overseas, in public spaces and private collections, Ullberg declines to play favorites. “Usually, my favorite sculpture is what I’m working on,” he says. “It hasn’t revealed its weaknesses to me yet.”

Laura Zuckerman is a free-lance writer living in Salmon, Idaho.

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