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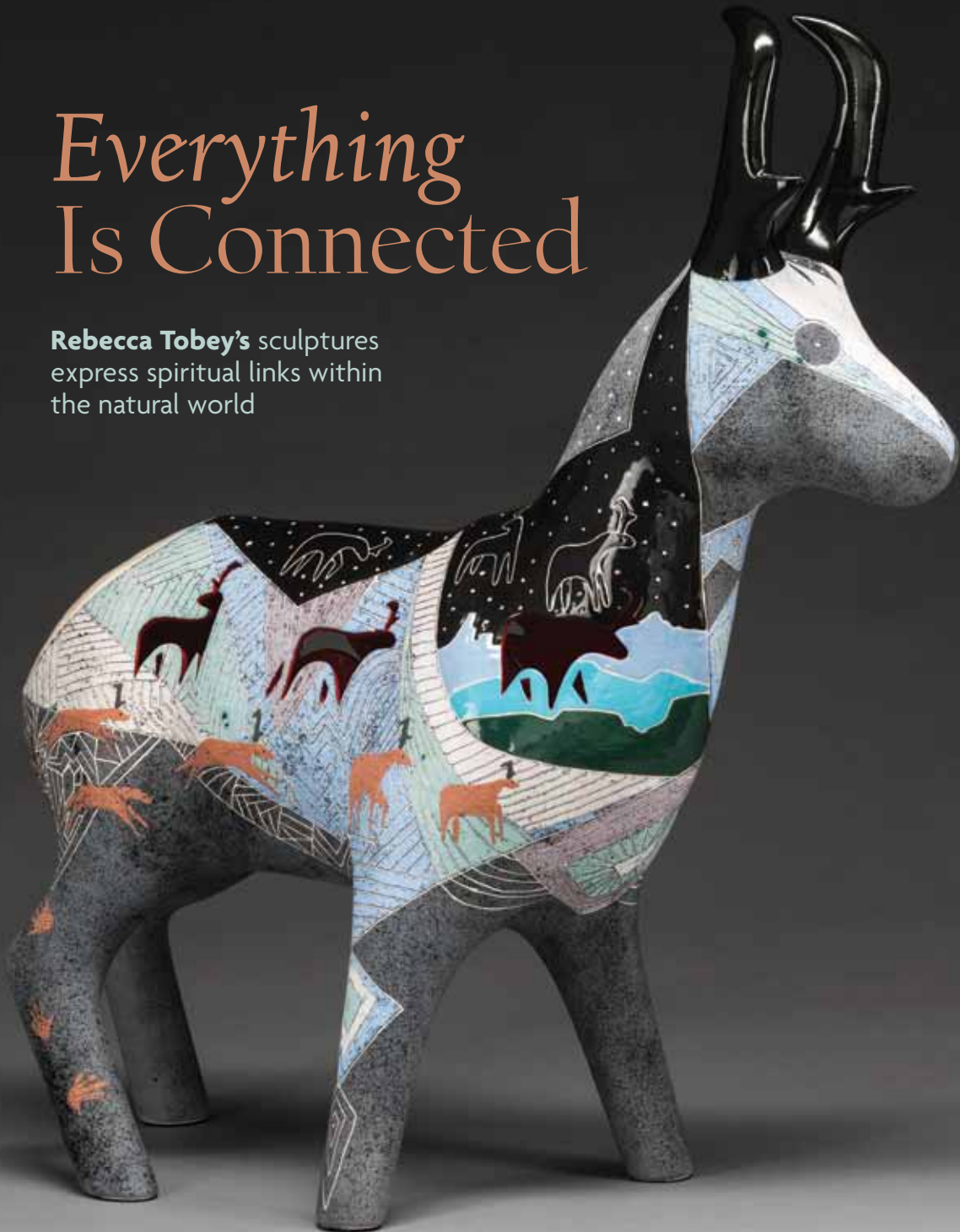
North Star,
a contemporary
ceramic sculpture
by Rebecca Tobey.



AUGUST 2017

Everything Is Connected

Rebecca Tobey's sculptures
express spiritual links within
the natural world



BY NORMAN KOLPAS



▲ Evensong, ceramic, 22 x 22 x 8.
 ◀ Night Vision, ceramic, 23 x 22 x 8.



“HUMANKIND HAS not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it,” said Chief Seattle, a 19th-century Pacific Northwest leader, in a speech he reputedly made to his tribe—words that found renewed interest during the environmental protests of the 1970s. “Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.”

Though those words themselves have not directly inspired sculptor Rebecca Tobey, her appreciation of the profound truths behind them undeniably inform the artist’s ceramic and bronze sculptures. “I feel a very strong connection to the earth,” says Tobey, who lives

and works on five acres “just outside of town” in Santa Fe. Take, for example, the 22-inch-tall ceramic piece entitled EVENSONG. It presents the sleekly stylized, massive form of a buffalo, the exaggerated hump of his back airbrushed and incised with a mountain sunset scene that encompasses a flock of sandhill cranes, a trio of deer, and salmon leaping from a river. For many viewers, works like this one evoke a Native American worldview. Yet, as she swiftly points out, “I’m not Native American, though people have long believed that I am.”

Tobey’s subject matter, the natural symbolism she employs, and the deeply felt sensibility that informs her work

representation

Solo show, **Ventana Fine Art**, Santa Fe, NM; **Exposures International Gallery of Fine Art**, Sedona, AZ; **J. Cotter Gallery**, Beaver Creek, CO; **Gold and Silversmith of Vail**, Vail, CO; **Beartooth Gallery Fine Art**, Red Lodge, MT.

upcoming shows

Solo show, **Beartooth Gallery Fine Art**, August 5.

A Timeless Legacy: Women Artists of Glacier National Park, Hockaday Museum of Art, Kalispell, MT, August 15-September 23.

Art for the Sangres, Westcliffe, CO, September 29-30.

Group show, **Exposures International Gallery**, October 13-15.

are not exclusive to one people or one place. Indeed, they have evolved over the 69-year-old artist's lifetime of experience and education—including a personal and professional partnership that played an important part in launching her artistic career and, following a tragic loss, provided her with a firm foundation upon which she has resolutely established her own solo reputation as a fine artist.

TOBEY WAS born in Ann Arbor, MI, and raised in Oak Ridge, TN, where her father, Arthur Upton, was a pathologist specializing in radiation research at the National Laboratory there. Her mother, Elizabeth, was a graphic designer, and both her parents took Rebecca and her younger sister and brother to local symphony concerts and on trips to Washington, DC, and New York City, “where we always traipsed through galleries and museums and got a wonderful overview of the arts.” She vividly recalls, for example, “standing in the Frick Collection in New York and listening to my mother talking about abstract expressionism.”

Rebecca's earliest aesthetic passion, however, was for the theater. She starred in many school plays and went on to major in theater arts at Adelphi University in Garden City, NY. That childhood steeping in the visual arts, however, held sway for her when she went on to grad school there, focusing on scenic design to earn her Master of Arts degree.

As she began her adult life in New York City, however, she at first left that training behind, working for a government-funded organization that trained teachers and community leaders to create drug education programs. Eventually, disaffected with big-city life on the East Coast, she moved to Santa Fe in 1975 and eventually got a job as the director of an art gallery.

One day in August 1984, into the gallery walked one of the artists it represented: Gene Tobey, a sculptor from Corvallis, OR. “It was love at first sight,” Rebecca recalls. The following May, Tobey moved to Santa Fe with his three children. He and Rebecca married that November.



Year of the Horse, bronze, 17 x 19 x 12.



Night Watchman, bronze, 15 x 27 x 8.



First Sign of Summer, ceramic, 14 x 8 x 8.

Recognizing his new bride's artistic training and talent, Tobey asked if she would be interested in applying the glazes to his works, which, at the time, tended toward small, realistic bronzes and earth-toned, thick-walled pottery in the style of Japanese *raku*. Together, the Tobey's set out to create a new collaborative body of work. Around 1986, Gene began to sculpt stylized, mostly tabletop-size animal shapes reminiscent of the somewhat-abstracted forms found in small Zuni fetishes. Rebecca,

meanwhile, began to lead their experimentation with colored clay slip, a liquefied suspension of glazing particles that adhered to a sculpture when fired, "enabling us to create a landscape on the side of a ceramic piece."

Moving forward, Gene would sculpt and cast each piece, then incise a design on the slip applied to its surface in a process known by the Italian term *sgraffito*, literally "scratching away." Next, Rebecca would apply the final, elaborate glazework to complete each

piece as a one-of-a-kind artwork. The process proved "to be extremely exciting and successful," says Rebecca. Rather than being multiple artworks cast from a single mold, each ceramic sculpture was essentially transformed into "an original three-dimensional canvas," with no two pieces alike apart from their base shape.

The Tobey's success soared over the next seven-plus years. Then, slowly, inexorably, tragedy overcame them.

From years of working with clay, Gene developed a serious lung-inflammation disease. Hoping a change of altitude and climate might help, the Tobey's moved to the Texas Hill Country in 1995; but he was sick again in 1997, and another move to the barrier islands off of Corpus Christi didn't help, either. Eventually, his chromosomes damaged by the medications he'd been prescribed for the disease, Gene developed leukemia. He died in January 2006, just five months after they'd returned to the Santa Fe home where Rebecca still lives today.

"Now what?" is how Rebecca sums up the dilemma she then faced in her grief. "What do I do? How do I go on? My creative partner was gone, and our lives were so seamlessly intertwined in our art."

At first she continued to work as Gene's partner. She wrote an illustrated book on their unique collaboration, *Partners in Art*, which was published in 2007. And, little by little, she finished pieces that Gene had begun before he passed away. "In the beginning, I didn't have my own artistic vision," she allows.

Gradually, however, working with new ceramic pieces cast from Gene's molds, she began creating her own original work on those 3-D canvases. In place of her late husband's more rugged, masculine approach came Rebecca's more feminine vision of the West. She began to add her own sculpted forms as well, including a rabbit, a pronghorn, and a raven. "I try to create something new every year," she says.

TOBEY'S CREATIVE process, which takes place in the studio converted from her home's three-car garage, extends far beyond that initial sculpting process.



Shining Out of the Dark, ceramic, 16 x 11 x 5.

“

In the past two years,
I feel like I have finally
arrived. I feel victorious.”

From the original piece, she'll make a plaster mold, "just as a foundry would for an original bronze." She fills the mold with liquid casting slip ¼ inch thick, and when that's leather-hard—firm enough to hold its form yet still pliable—she cuts out decorative holes that allow heat and moisture to escape so the sculptures can be kiln-fired without exploding. "The negative space of the holes," she says, "becomes a really important design component," one she'll often further highlight by glazing the interior in bright red "so the piece glows from within under bright gallery lights." Then comes the painting and glazing, the sgraffito, and the final firing. Her goal in this process, she says, is to add "so many layers of interest" to each piece that viewers might not see them all at an initial glance, each return look providing fresh rewards.

Tobey uses a similar multilayered approach in producing the limited-edition bronzes she also sculpts, which find an eager audience among avid collectors of that medium. The bronzes possess an almost balletic lightness of form. Yet, she admits to a particular fondness for her ceramic pieces—and not only because each piece is unique in its own right or because that particular process traces back to her initial collaborations with Gene. "My bronzes are born somewhere else," miles away in someone else's foundry, she explains. "I like ceramics far better because they're born right in my studio. I go to the kiln and open it, and it's like Christmas every day."

Such are the benefits of the new creative life Tobey has established for herself. As she comes fully into her own as an artist, one could even say they abound for her with comfort and joy. "I spent 20 years as Gene's collaborator," she says. "But now I've taught myself how to draw, how to sculpt, how



Wilderness Home, ceramic, 9 x 12 x 15.

to cut the holes in the pieces. I figured out how to use an airbrush to paint sunsets on the ceramics, and that felt like a coup. I really enjoy steering my own ship." She eagerly anticipates continuing to work through her 70s, perhaps even through her 80s. "In the past two years," she concludes, "I feel like I have finally arrived. I feel victorious." ❖

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Mountain Living* and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.

See more of Tobey's work at
www.southwestart.com/featured/tobey-r-aug2017.