

MSJ: Where did you grow up and how did it influence your life as an artist and angler?

I grew up in Grand Haven, MI. which is located on the shore of Lake Michigan. My parents still live there in our small house on Millhouse Bayou. As kids, my brothers and I would spend our entire summer vacations stalking the shores of Millhouse Bayou, catching bass, bluegills and the occasional northern pike. Having grown up spending all my time on the water, I just can't shake the desire to always be on the water. That said, I suppose it makes good sense that I'm still passionate about painting and catching fish.

MSJ: When did you decide to make fish art your career?

As a kid, art was always a big deal to me. I thought I was going to be the next Van Gogh or something, at least that's what my grandparents led me to believe. But, in fourth grade I entered the Michigan United Conservation Clubs youth wildlife art competition. My entry was a pencil drawing of a walleye attacking some minnows. I just assumed I was going to win first place, since I didn't know a single other kid that could draw as well as me. When my family and I arrived at the awards ceremony in Lansing MI, I scanned the art on the walls for the blue ribbon, figuring that would be the quickest way to find my drawing. So it came as a shock when I found that I didn't even get an honorable mention (of which there were about 50). That was when I realized that if I was going to be a professional artist, I would have to start working at it. I started taking weekly art classes, and learned the basics from a local legend oil painter named Bob Michmerhiezen. The next year I still didn't win that wildlife art competition, but I did place second with an acrylic painting of a largemouth bass. I was dedicated to painting fish from then on. Of course I've painted many subjects over the years, but fish have been my primary focus from fourth grade until now. I think it takes a lifetime of painting a subject, to truly be able to push it to that next level, and get people to look at it with rejuvenated enthusiasm. At least it has for me.

MSJ: Who was your idol, professionally, early on?

I've never been the idol type but I will say the older I get, the more interested in the history of art I become. I go to as many art museums as I can, all types, contemporary, modern, renaissance. I love how art makes me think about and question things. When I look at paintings from thousands of years ago, it just blows my mind how skilled the painters were back then. I'm convinced that although humans have advanced technologically, our ability to execute artistically is relatively the same as it ever was. Today we have so many advantages as artists,

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with the technical advancement of digital cameras, computers, projectors, all kinds of tools that allow us to paint easier.

As for my favorite artist... it's got to be Van Gogh. Cliché I know, but he pushed the envelope so far with his bold colors and strokes. I get inspired every time I look at his work.

MSJ: What is your favorite Montana fishery?

From the first time I came to Montana, I was overwhelmed with fishing options. I can't say I like one fishery better than another, but I will say that I like to fish in places where I can have some solitude. I love fishing best when I'm out there in nature, with only the sounds of the flowing water and the songs of the birds in the bushes along the stream. I love the disconnect to present day that I feel when I'm floating down the river with no boats or houses in sight.

MSJ: How many days a year do you fish?

From 1999 – 2007, I lived in Grand Rapids, Michigan. During that period I became a steelhead junkie, and would fish up to three or four days a week, when the steelies had moved into the Grand and Rogue Rivers. Then I moved to Livingston, Montana in November of 2007. That first winter I fished for at least an hour or two almost everyday. I just loved exploring all the water around the Livingston section of the Yellowstone River. I'll never forget the first 18" brown I landed on a salmonfly nymph. It was a very exciting time, and I'll tell you, I was better at nymphing that winter than I ever was before or have been since. It's amazing how sharp your skills get when you fish everyday. Today as my art career has gotten busier, I still try to get out and fish as much as possible, but it is nowhere near as much as I'd like. I can't complain too much though, this winter I was able to fulfill a lifetime angling goal, as I spent a month and a half fishing in the Florida Keys. Being out on the flats almost everyday was one of the most brilliant experiences of my life. You never knew what you were going to see or catch out there. One time as I was re-rigging a line, I heard a splash that seemed consistent with a grand piano being dropped from an airplane into the water. Startled, I looked up to see a huge gray dorsal fin and 12" of gray back as a giant shark chased a school of jacks up onto the flat 100 yards from my boat.

MSJ: Where can your art be found in Montana?

My work is here and there around MT, but the place to go if you want to see a good collection of my work is my studio/gallery, here at my home in Livingston.

Just make sure to drop us a line and we'd love to show you around. A couple other places you can find my paintings or prints are: East Rosebud Fly and Tackle in Billings, Paradise Valley Grill in Livingston, Sweetwater Fly Shop in Livingston and Trout Hunter Lodge in Island Park, ID.

MSJ: You do commissioned work; what is the most unusual thing or place you have been asked to paint?

When I was fresh out of art school, I was working towards becoming a sporting artist but like most young artists, I would take any job I could. My wife, Janell was famous for finding me jobs from the Kendall College Job Board. I'd wake up in the morning and head for the kitchen to make coffee and there would be a note next to the coffee maker telling me what job she'd signed me up for that day. I was usually happy for the work, but when the steelies were in.. .boy I would resent the heck out of that dang job board. One day she got me a job taking photos of new building in downtown Grand Rapids. The lady that hired me seemed disappointed when I showed up with a \$100 point and shoot digital camera. Another early job was to paint some lady's Rottweilers. Strangely, a couple years later I got a call from her, it turned out her husband literally went crazy and took a scissors and shredded the painting of the dogs. I felt flattered that my painting evoked such passion out of someone, even if the result was the painting getting shredded. These days I stick more to doing commissions based on my original series of fish paintings. I have done several tattoo designs for trout junkies though, and even had one guy want me to paint his limo like a brown trout. I'd do it too, but I think he wants to pay me in flies.

MSJ: Is there a painting or two that you would consider a favorite?

With each painting I feel like I learn a little and try to use what I learned in my next painting. An example of this is I used a specific green in the eye of a brown trout and it turned out great. I will definitely take note of that and use that green hue again in future paintings. On the contrary, I used a certain green in the upper part of a brown trout's head and it just didn't read as natural at all. Lesson; don't use that green on browns anymore. My favorite two painting series that I've come up with are the Abstract Fish Face series, as well as the 4 in 1 Full series. I think the paintings from both of these series have pushed the boundary of fish art and made people think about my subject in a new way. I guess that is the toughest thing to accomplish as an artist and when it happens a few times over the years, you've got to stop and take note.

MSJ: What other hobbies besides fishing do you have?

Besides fishing most of my hobbies are based on being outside. For me, it's all about being in the outdoors, exploring and having adventures. I love camping, hiking and scavaging. We have so many mountains around Livingston it would take a lifetime to explore them all. I really enjoy looking for morels, elk and deer sheds, agates, or arrowheads, I just love wondering, clearing my head, and searching this beautiful landscape for treasures. Once I found a creepy little cast iron face with three eyes.. kinda voodoo looking. I mounted it on my easel.. I think it is a good luck charm for my paintings.

MSJ: Is it true that you have caught a Montana state record fish?

I did catch the MT state record Tiger Musky. It was one of the most amazing fishing experiences of my life. And just by chance my Dad was out on a visit from Michigan, and shared the day with me. He says he's glad that it was me who landed it, but I really find that hard to believe. I never did submit the fish for weight and length measurements, instead opted to let it go, to make some other angler's musky dreams come true. It measured 52" and if you catch one this year several inches bigger from that "secret Musky lake", say "hi" to him from me. I'm sure the record is larger than that now, as I caught mine a couple seasons ago.