Calvin Nicholls

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Intricate Transformation

written by Debra Usher

The world's finest papers transformed into 3 dimensional sculptures. This is the work of Calvin Nicholls. Take a look at a piece of paper, no matter the texture, the colour or the size - it is a flat, 2 dimensional object for the most part. In the hands and tools of Calvin Nicholls paper becomes alive and you can almost hear it move. His work jumps off the page and into your heart as you gaze at the intricate work of a master. Calvin Nicholls does art in a unique way. He sculpts paper and that is something that very few other artists do.

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Starting Out

He was born in Oshawa in 1957 and grew up fifty miles north in a rural setting a mile or so north of the small village of Seagrave. The rural farming life was the focus of his childhood and it was a life that brought him much joy.

"I loved rural life and all it offered," Calvin recalls, "the distant horizons and open spaces of the neighbouring farms gave me a vast area to witness nature in its entire splendor. Snowshoes or snow mobiles in the winter and hiking boots or canoe in the summer took me on great adventures through the woodlots and nearby Nonquon River at every opportunity."

The family had a true love of the outdoors. Vacations would find them camping for weeks at a time, traveling to most of Ontario's Provincial parks but gradually settling on two favourites, Grundy Lake near Sudbury and Samuel de Champlain near Mattawa, "My appreciation for the lakes, forests and the creatures they gave life to grew during these summers with my family, friends and cousins who often traveled with us," he says.

His father farmed and worked for GM and his uncles and grandfather were self-employed. They talked a lot about why they did what they did and what they got out of it. There were valuable lessons to be learned here and Calvin soaked them up, realizing that community, friends and hard work formed the basis of a happy life

"As was the case in my parents' youth," Calvin goes on to explain, "self-reliance was evident in the gardening, preserving and chopping our own wood for the fireplace that contributed to the electric heat in our new home. This mindset would prove invaluable later in my life as an artist."

This sort of community way of thinking was everywhere. Calvin recalls that the church also provided a sort of centre where the kids were valued members. "The ministers and youth group leaders were mentors for all of us," he explains, "guiding us through our teenage years and building confidence in each and every one of us. Drying dishes at the turkey suppers, playing hymns for Sunday School, acting out skits for Christmas concerts and whooping it up on the doorstep during a "shiveree" celebration for a recently married couple taught us about the warmth and connection of community."

A developing dimension in art

When he was young, model making, carving, building, constructing, de-constructing filled many hours of Calvin's life – at the same time he was fascinated with drawing. He remembers that the artistic way of seeing the world was modeled by the people around him. His mother was an artist with the sewing machine, making clothes and altering for friends or neighbors. She also knitted and worked with leather. His father would cut and form sheet metal before applying compound to restore body panels on hobby cars.

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Above, Beavers

Then there were piano lessons in elementary school which gave way to guitar and banjo all of which complimented his strong interest in art. As high school continued, art took up more and more of Calvin's time. His art teacher and artists who were friends of Calvin's mother helped to introduce him to the world of commercial art.

"Lacking confidence in a fine art path but driven by a strong interest in art, I decided on graphic design where art communicated messages and solved problems," Calvin explains. "This application of art and creative thinking really appealed to me so the Graphic Design diploma program at Sheridan College in Oakville proved to be a perfect fit.

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I graduated in 1979 and immediately found work at an advertising agency in north Toronto which then lead to opening my own freelance studio a short year and a half later." It was a humble beginning with a sheet of plywood on his bed as a working surface and an art table with a single filing cabinet in the corner of his apartment. His first clients were family and friends, but word got out and work increased.

"In 1984, I hired a paper sculpture artist, Jonathan Milne, to help with a menu production for a prominent family restaurant in Toronto. Perhaps inspired by a class in Sheridan years before where we explored the properties of paper in a materials and structures session, I was intrigued with Milne's craft and we became fast friends. He was incredibly busy and had little time to take on new work so I made the plunge and experimented exploring scoring ad tooling textures into paper. It was one of those eureka moments. Borrowing tools from the leather working kit at home, I pressed on and introduced my early attempts to my design clients and it began. My sculptures appeared on brochures, posters, packages and annual reports."

A few of my favourite things

In 1990 the Buckhorn Wildlife Art Festival gave Calvin the opportunity to try combining two of his favourite things. His interest in paper and wildlife imagery. He launched two limited editions and three decorator prints - Mallards, Snowy Owl, Hummingbird at Lilies, Phoenix and Loon at Nest. The originals were framed with an explanation of the process and technique.

"My preoccupation with the illusion of depth in the printed form was driven by corporate print campaigns," he explains, "that was the source of my income to that point so the idea that the actual sculptures would be of interest was a surprise."

In subsequent years he refined his approach to creating these illusions of depth using less and less physical depth so as to allow for simple shadow box framing. White paper placed an emphasis on the material and presented subtle transitions of tone that appealed to Calvin and the viewers.

It all begins with inspiration – a scene or a gesture can catch Calvin's attention – which is then captured in a sketch or photograph. These really help with the layout but then there are sketches and studies, drawings to define certain aspects and finally moving on to pattern drawings.

"The body form is made out of thick archival paper to provide a base to the basic form," explains Calvin. "I work from the outside edges in, gluing on the detail pieces in much the same way you would shingle a roof – outside edge inward."

Tooling the paper pieces is done on foam core to allow for controlled embossing or debossing, while he continues to use leather working tools and burnishers along with a variety of scalpels and x-acto knives.

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Previous Page 2, Regal Eagle

Calvin uses dedicated lighting in his studio as he assembles each piece, allowing him to see how the play of the light will work over the emerging artwork. “You also need to be very careful,” he continues, “there are just so many things that can go wrong. If you overwork the paper you lose a lot of the effectiveness, you also have to be careful not to cause wrinkles and puckers. Excessive glue will warp so care must be given here as well.” In other words, a lot of care, a lot of light and SHARP blades.

Inspiration

“Whether my immediate family, an uncle or grandparent, the proprietor at the local general store or the father of a close friend; words of encouragement to pursue my dreams meant a great deal when I was young and inspired me to persevere even through the toughest times as an artist. These people had an effect on my life that they may never have realized.”

It was people, moments, and decisions like this that have propelled Calvin forward. Like the day in 1981 when he stood at Nathan Phillip Square in Toronto and decided he wanted an adventure on his terms. That very day he left Promanad in Weston and started building his own graphic design business one client at a time. “I do not recall any specific person standing there propelling me through it,” he says, “The mirror did most of the convincing.”

The list of influential family, friends, clients and even strangers is long. Calvin truly believes that most people have affected him in one way or another, contributing to the journey of life. Perhaps this is a reflection of his original community and family values. There is a sense that everything is connected and everything is important.

His family is his inspiration, and being able to be there with his kids while they grew up was invaluable to Calvin. “My children grew up with my wife and I at home where we worked.” he explains, “Cookies were delivered up to the attic and their artwork covers the studio walls and vaulted ceilings. I was home for mealtime’s often working late but reading stories at night and holidaying as we chose - it was wonderful.”

Then there is the small town of Lindsay with its fields and forests, the ability to talk to clients and others who are interested in nature, and collaboration. “I thoroughly enjoy collaborative projects,” muses Calvin, “as the client’s input or goals are really interesting to me. Many images and concepts come to mind but having a dialogue about those adds depth to me. I love the idea of creating for someone and seeing the role art plays in life.”

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Intricacy

The details bring out the best in Calvin. Trying to figure out exactly where to score a piece of paper so as to mimic the intricacy of an animals musculoskeletal form for example. Or choosing to work with white on white in order to force the issue of form and technique. There is just something to the way paper folds, scores, or reacts to light that takes so much work and provides just the right challenge.

"I do it because it offers a twist," he concludes, "perhaps different enough that it prompts a conversation, but for me it's an outright challenge to find the limit for detail and to harness light in creating the form and texture of the subject. Developing the pattern drawings prior to cutting is fascinating too - every piece is planned before any cutting happens. The principles of layout and that interaction of form and counter-form always draw me in - I love the pursuit of balance and flow in whatever the subject or moment at play is."

"Many of the papers I use now are handmade by artisans in Europe, Japan and North America. "Detail decisions in the final drawings are kept close at hand as I cut and assemble the often tiny bits into a robust body-form that has established the topography of the piece. I catch myself every once in a while placing an individual hair with tweezers (something I vowed I would never do), but more often strands of hair are grouped where possible as the flow of the surface texture allows."

"Working in modeling lights, I watch the light play over the surface of the paper, and it's during this attempt at harnessing the light that the necessary highlights and shadows are created. The two-dimensional result of my photographs comes after hours of lighting and test shots. I love watching the light play over the surface. It never ceases to amaze me how that subtle transition of highlight to shadow even such reduced overall depth can create such a powerful illusion of full form."

"Each and every connection that results from this art form enriches my life. I am so grateful for the doors that have opened for me and, thankfully, I had just enough confidence to walk through. As I learned so early in my journey, art communicates. To enjoy the process and to see it bring joy to others sometimes seems to be the greatest gift of all."

To check out more of Calvin Nicholls artwork and events please visit:

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Following Page, Hedgehog
Following Page 2, Lynx

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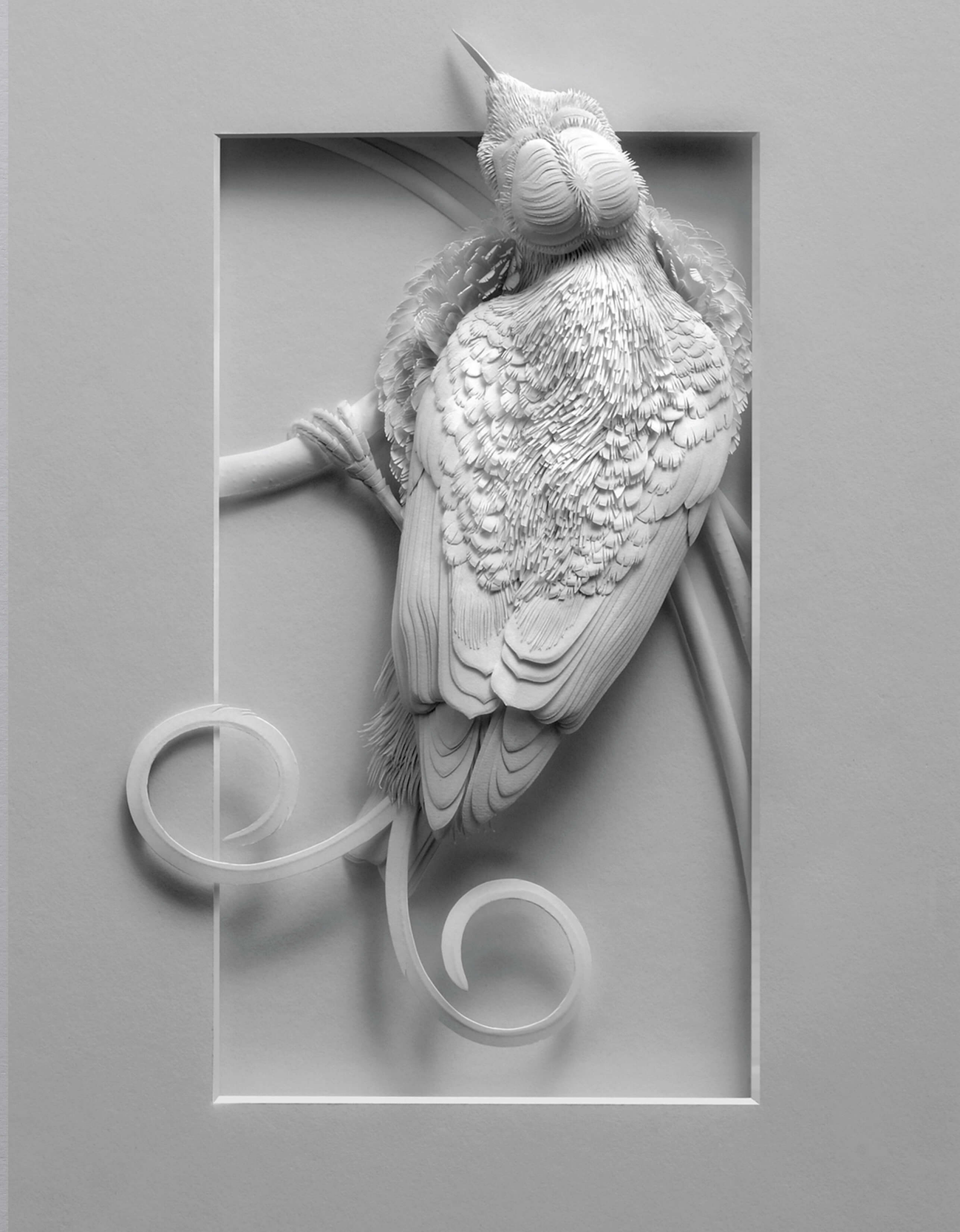

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