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DROOL
NO. 3



THE ANIMAL

“IT’S BETTER THAN STUFFING
YOUR OWN DOG”—SCULPTOR
AND DOG RESCUER, TIM RACER.

S A R V E R

Most people look at a piece of wood and think of a tree, but Racer sees a world of dogs and animals made by his own hands.

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“THINK TWICE ABOUT TAKING ON dog carvings,” was the advice that Tim Racer’s mentor passed on 17 years ago, when Racer started his career as a sculptor. As fate would have it, disregarding that advice is what led Racer down the unique path of becoming a professional carver. “I’ve found myself in a nice little niche creating portraits of people’s dogs, and fortunately, have always had work on my plate,” he says. Most of his work consists of noble carousels and rockers that somehow make the world feel like a kinder, happier place. His latest work, however, immortalizes two special dogs with difficult past lives that have earned them a sculpture of their own. We sat down with Racer to better understand his creative process, his deep passion for rescue dogs, and his upcoming projects.

DROOL: *Where are you from? Are you a morning person or a night owl?*

RACER: I’m the son of a pianist and a ballplayer from metro Detroit. I’ve always been a night owl; I can still remember the first time I was allowed to stay up until 1:00 in the morning, around the age of five, and I loved it. I could rarely fall asleep until midnight as a child anyway — maybe that’s why I believe in things like ghosts.

D: *Who was the first dog that modeled for you?*

R: When I decided to give carving a try, I started with our fine bulldog, Sally. She was a pit bull from a local shelter whose time was up, so we took her home and she changed our lives dramatically — a great specimen for a carving, for sure.

D: *You and your wife, Donna, co-founded a pit bull advocacy group, BADRAP. What kind of impact has the organization had since it started?*

R: We’ve been blessed to be part of an evolution of acceptance for the dogs. When we first started, I think we were viewed as extremists or rebels who viewed pit bulls and their mixes as “just dogs” who needed a little extra help to get a seat on the bus with other dogs. Two decades later, after a lot of work and thousands of individual successes and stories, the dogs have amazingly become one of the top five most popular breeds in the country. They sold themselves once people gave them a chance. It’s an exceptional feeling to have played a part in their history.

D: *Too often, pit bulls have been associated with dogfighting. How serious is this problem today?*

R: Organized dogfighting — now a felony in all 50 states — is much



Owners can recognize incredible details on their dogs, so Racer pays attention to each and every body part of his carvings to make them uniquely lifelike.



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less common than it used to be, but it still exists. Abusing dogs this way on a smaller, street-level scale still happens, and probably always will to some extent. Humane education work that helps kids view dogs as sentient beings is an ongoing need to help curb any kind of abuse, including dogfighting.

D: What are you working on now?

R: The piece that I'm finishing up right now is the second dog in a two-dog carving commission, Uba and Jamie. The dogs lived together and were great friends, and both of them are dear to me since they're dogs from BADRAP. Both dogs survived large-scale dogfighting cases and came into our adoption program after Donna and I worked with Feds to rescue them. The black-and-white dog, Uba, was from the infamous Michael Vick dogfighting case, and his girlfriend, Jamie, was from one of the largest dogfight busts in U.S. history. One of our volunteers, Letti de Little, adopted them and commissioned me to carve them both. Uba is still alive and is one of the last remaining dogs from the Vick case, which was late 2007. Uba still has a lot of energy for a 15-year-old dog. He was the second dog we evaluated while in Virginia, and we were thrilled that, although he was frightened — like so many of the dogs from that case — he was a dog that we'd take into our program without question. That meant a lot to us since dogs from fighting

A notepad where Racer keeps a very accurate track of how many hours he puts into his work for each project.



“...MY VERY FIRST COMMISSION WAS LOCAL AND SHE IMMEDIATELY BROKE DOWN CRYING WHEN I PULLED THE SHEET OFF. THANKFULLY, THEY WERE TEARS OF JOY...”

cases were being systematically destroyed, and our goal was to change that policy.

D: *Why did you carve Jaime and Uba in a mid-air jump?*

R: Since Uba and Jamie were such good pals, my idea was to design them together as a single piece that showed them interacting as they used to do. Uba’s looking up in his pose, and since Jamie was such a wild child, always jumping around and pestering, it was natural to have her jumping over him as they gaze at each other. Her leaping, twisting gesture was the most challenging pose I’ve carved to date, but I think it captures her spazzy personality to a tee. The finished piece brings back a lot of memories from all the dogs we’ve known who survived incredible odds, and knowing that Uba’s and Jamie’s doppelgängers will be happy and having fun together for all eternity is especially heartwarming. I’m grateful to have had a client who was willing to make this piece a reality.

D: *Has anyone ever reacted in a way that surprised you when they received their finished piece?*

R: I ship most of my pieces around the country, so I don’t get to see my clients’ initial reactions, but my very first commission was local and she immediately broke down crying when I pulled the sheet off. Thankfully, they were tears of joy.

D: *Your works showcase fantastic attention to detail and immaculate color range. Where does that come from, and who are some of your influences?*

R: I think my obsession with detail just comes naturally, whether it’s doing art or telling a story — sometimes to a fault. I try to make myself simplify at times, but that

might not be so apparent. Color has always been my thing; later in life I realized that I was using complementary colors when I was quite young, then I had to learn to tone them down a little. Shockingly, two of my very favorite artists were more of an influence than I imagined: Tamara de Lempicka and J.C. Leyendecker. Two different people on Facebook have mentioned that my carving work reminded them of these artists. Several times I’ve looked at my carving strokes while roughing out a piece and noticed the unintended influence of Leyendecker, but never imagined anyone else would possibly notice it.

D: *What have you learned about dogs through your work?*

R: Since reading years ago about the notion that dogs domesticated themselves, I’ve looked at dogs through that lens. With a great study group at hand, I finally just started asking all the dogs that come through BADRAP’s program if it was true — and they unanimously agreed. You can’t argue with that.

D: *What project do you hope to take on next?*

R: I have more dog commissions ahead of me, but I’m really excited about carving a cat. A really big cat: a mountain lion. We live in the Oakland Hills next to a lot of open space, and at times we have mountain lions come by the property. One killed a deer 30 feet from our place a while back, and it thrills me to know that they are still out there, doing their thing so close to us. I’ll put other native California animals on the carving as the trappings: gray fox, raven, dusky-footed woodrat, maybe a gopher snake. We have room in our house for one more carving, and this is it. 



Racer uses English, Japanese, and Swiss tools in his work. The most special are the Swiss set that he purchased from an estate sale that belonged to one of the famed Swiss “Black Forest” carvers from the 1800s.