

# MONUMENTAL INSPIRATION

BY VIRGINIA CAMPBELL

GRAINGER MCKOY JR. DESCRIBES HIS 57-YEAR-old father and namesake rather startlingly as “the most hated and feared sculptor in America.” If the sketch is accurate, even as hyperbole, it makes Grainger McKoy Sr., who sculpts wild birds in wood, bronze and silver, an unlikely candidate to produce anything that the Medical University of South Carolina Hollings Cancer Center had in mind when it commissioned him to sculpt a monumental piece of inspirational art to uplift the spirits of the people in its care.

“I plagiarize God,” says the sculptor himself. The vowels of McKoy’s speech, which comes straight out of the Carolinas, terrain that his family has inhabited for many generations, are so open and attenuated you can feel a marsh breeze billowing through them. It’s that native music surrounding his words that hints at what he and his son mean with their playfully confrontational statements.

The senior McKoy’s sculptures are precise renderings of wild birds stopped in critical moments—rising, falling, hunting, struggling with prey, dying. Each is executed with a technical sureness of complexity and aesthetic daring. With the sculptures’ remarkable verisimilitude neck and neck with their unusual beauty, they offer a rare kind of transcendent experience.

McKoy’s 8-foot-bronze sculpture of a single, sweeping pintail duck’s wing is what the Hollings Cancer Center will soon place where patients and their families can be helped to heal or, at least, transcend. Unlike McKoy’s usual work, which, carved in wood and/or cast in bronze or silver, most often involves life-sized birds—raptors are his favorites—the Hollings piece is simply one wing taken to heroic





*Red-Shouldered  
Hawks and  
Copperhead Snake,  
basswood, brass,  
steel and oil paint,  
7'H*

proportion. The sculpture's name, *Recovery Stroke*, plays deliberately on the piece's unique setting, but refers more accurately to the specific movement of a bird's wing when it is taken back to "recover" from one "power stroke" and prepare for the next. "It's the most interesting position of a bird's wing," says McKoy. "It's a graceful place to be, one of vulnerability."

#### DATE WITH DESTINY

McKoy's personal story is a fascinating tale grounded in the present with solid success, animated in the past with improbable origins, and

enlivened at crucial points by fortunate influences. "I've been blessed with a lot of 'encouragers,'" McKoy says plainly, revealing that which he considers to be the most important.

"My mother and father knew each other all their lives in Wilmington, N.C.," he begins. They were, in fact, cousins. "They didn't want the restrictions of that tight-knit community—the country club and the yacht club. So when I was a small boy, they moved to Sumter, S.C., bought 10 acres and built a cabin out of cypress logs they went out into the swamp to cut. They couldn't even afford windows or a refrigerator at first."

The family made visits back home. "I remember we had to put our shoes on when we crossed the bridge to Cape Fear to visit my father's mother," says McKoy. But his parents never wavered in their determination to raise their children their own way. "They wanted us to have a sense of place."

When McKoy was 9 years old, his father died of a heart attack. His mother kept the family right where it was, making do on a church secretary's meager salary of \$25 a week plus \$350 a month from Social Security. She was McKoy's first and most important encourager. "She'd watch us from the kitchen window while she did the dishes," says McKoy, "and she could see what interested each of us. If we'd had a TV and sat in front of it, she would not have learned anything. But give kids a sand pile to play in and you can find out who's there."

In McKoy's case, it was wood in his hands and birds before his eyes. "I grew up with wood all around me," he recalls, "and I was fascinated with flight." When he took an immediate, deep interest in a wood decoy his grandmother gave him, McKoy's mother helped him saw a chunk of cypress from the end of the log on the exterior of their house so he could carve his own bird. "She wanted to cultivate what was in my 'soil,'" he says. She also drove him to art class a few hours away in Columbia, and took him to the Library of Congress to look at paintings of birds, particularly those of John James Audubon, who became an early, personal hero.

"I never considered making art a career," says McKoy. "I studied architecture at Clemson University in Clemson, S.C., because I loved three-dimensional stuff. I was never satisfied with just two dimensions. But I hit a wall after my sophomore year when I worked for an architect and saw the disparity between the study and the practice. So I got my degree in biology."

## ENCOURAGED BY ECCENTRICITY

By the time McKoy graduated and discovered he didn't know what he wanted to do, he was already married and a father. But he'd also already met his second great encourager, an eccentric oystercatcher named Gilbert Maggione, who "drank, cursed, lived in a little vine-covered house in Beaufort and loved art." Maggione carved birds—not decoys or just more detailed birds in static positions, but eye-opening accurate renderings of the creatures in action. Maggione had seen something in McKoy's carved birds and took him on as an apprentice. Maggione and McKoy visited the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the National Gallery in the capital to see bronze sculptures of wildlife as well as the work of Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent and other American geniuses.

Over the ensuing years, the two men became more like artistic partners as they advanced into an art form that grew half out of the time-honored craft of decoy carving and half out of the tradition of bird portraiture that had been raised to a fine art by Audubon. Together, they created pieces made of individual elements that were carved in phenomenal detail and then inserted them one by one into their sculptures. The enterprise defined by Maggione was brazenly ambitious.

McKoy quickly sold his first piece for \$75, and, he says, "I grabbed the plough and never looked back."

Five years later, in 1974, he had a show at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. One piece in that show, *Red-Shouldered Hawks and Copperhead Snake*, is evidence of the imaginative progress he'd made. Two hawks painted with Audubon-like authenticity wrangle in

mid-air over a striking copperhead whose tail, knotted around a bunch of weeds at the sculpture's base, supports the entire high-wire act. And it is wire. Metal armatures engineered according to a trial-and-error gut knowledge of balance keep the violent, natural ballet aloft.

Within another half-decade, McKoy upped the ante dramatically with sculptures of groups of birds. *Covey Rising*, from 1981, shows Eastern bobwhite quail hustling out of gravity's pull, their flight interconnected wingtip to wingtip. A couple of years later, a poetic tour de force emerged. It remains one of McKoy's best pieces. *Least Bittern* consists of a painted wood water bird suspended upside down from the leaf blade of a reed. Its bill touches an invisible water surface made all the more present by the bittern's reflection—an inverse figure carved from dark, unpainted walnut, extending its bill upward toward the water's "surface." The compositional subtlety and delicate animation of Asian painting comes into three dimensions made possible by thrilling technical finesse.

*Covey Rising*,  
high-carbon steel  
and oil paint, 7'H

Inset:  
*Covey Rising* sketch



## EPIPHANY OF WOOD

Almost 10 years ago, McKoy found a way to cast bronze to retain the painstaking accuracy of detail that he never relinquished in his growth toward expressive art. The casting involves making rubber molds from carved-wood elements. (McKoy decides at the outset whether he'll cast a piece, and if so, constructs the elements differently.) Wax is injected into the rubber molds, which results in exact replicas of the original wood. Ceramic molds are made of the wax pieces, and the wax is melted out and bronze is poured in. The final bronze sculptures are composed from these individual pieces. *Recovery Stroke* has 40 such pieces. Bronze brings to McKoy's work what he calls a "classical" quality that his basic raw material, humble basswood (a kind of higher altitude linden that's "nondescript, stable and lacks resin") must overcome bias to reach. "When people hear wood, they think whittle," says the sculptor. "To this way of thinking, wood is something you build with or burn."

McKoy admits to burning his share of basswood. The difficulty of his method—ultimately this is what irks other sculptors, because it raises the technical bar so drastically—produces a lot of failure. "That's why I have a stove in my studio," he says. "I've been told I'm a high-challenge person. It's not competition I respond to, but someone saying, 'You can't do that.' My best work is created in fear about whether I can make something work."

The studio where McKoy works out his fears sits 100 yards from the house he shares with his wife, Floride. The 200-year-old structure is made of old yellow pine and sits on a high bluff at the edge of a swamp near Stateburg, S.C. Grainger McKoy Jr., who lives on the South Carolina coast, runs his father's business, which now includes jewelry inspired by a piece the sculptor made for Floride that immediately generated interest, word of mouth and buyers. (It is eminently more affordable than the sculpture.) McKoy's older brothers, encouraged in the same way he was by their mother, prospered in work they showed an early feel for. One is now the largest tomato farmer in the Carolinas. The other is a well-known veterinarian. All have the sense of place their parents wanted them to have. When *Recovery Stroke* is unveiled later this year at Hollings, it's likely to be thought just right for its place, too. [WA](#)

*Virginia Campbell was the editor of Movieline magazine in Los Angeles for more than 12 years. She continues to write about film, as well as art, design, technology and lifestyle for numerous consumer magazines.*

Images courtesy of the artist.  
Photography by Ted Borg

*Least Bittern,*  
basswood, walnut, metal  
and oil paint, 30"H

