

In the studio

BY MICHELE CORRIEL



The Great Outdoors

*Field sports sculptor
Liz Lewis defies
expectations through
experience in and
out of the studio*

LIZ LEWIS SCULPTS THE THINGS SHE LOVES. In this case, it's bird dogs, sharp-tailed grouse, pheasants and anything on the end of a fishing line. Most people would agree that it's highly unusual for a woman to be a field sports sculptor, but Liz Lewis shatters that stereotype.

"I've been involved with shooting and the outdoors my whole life," she says, taking the cover off a slow cooker filled with warmed clay. "My dad always said I was his favorite son."

Both her parents were competitive pistol and rifle shooters and as a young girl, Lewis took up the sport as well, traveling to England at one point to train with their national team. When she was 12 she began hunting.

"It just feels real...It's the closest connection to nature you can have," she says, positioning the pipe and fittings armature that will end up being a sculpture of a fox. "Wildlife has just always been my passion."

About four or so years ago, Lewis began sculpting. She had been a fishing guide, but when she had her daughter and ended up being home more than she was used to, she turned to the things she'd always done when she couldn't go outside.

"I'd always sketched and carved, but I never tried sculpting before," she says. "I was frustrated whenever I painted because I was only dealing with two dimensions, when I knew there were really three."

Staying home with her daughter allowed Lewis to teach herself the basics.

"I had a lot of time, and I just kept working on it," she



says, taking bits of the waxy clay and building up the body of the animal in front of her. “And I didn’t want to do pieces like the regal elk that other people do. I wanted to work from my own experiences; plenty of people do the idealized version of wildlife.”

By way of explanation, she points to one of her fully displayed sharp-tailed grouse bronzes, his wings shooting straight out to his sides, as is their habit during the mating ritual.

“I spent a lot of time watching these guys,” she says. “I wanted to be sure to get everything right, but you don’t see bronzes of grouse like this very often. I’m really a sporting life artist more than anything else.”

Another piece, a bas-relief bronze of two hanging pheasants sits on her desk, opposite her workbench. The pheasants, ready to be plucked or stuffed, are a symbol of bounty for Lewis.

“A sportsman would love this because it conveys something they’d be proud of,” she says. “They could hang it in the kitchen. Other people might not like the idea of dead pheasants as art.”

Lewis cuts open a carton and lifts a block of clay out, unwraps it and slices it up, like hunks of fudge, into small pieces that fit into her slow cooker.

She squeezes a bit of clay off a brick and smooths it onto the aluminum wire tail of the fox. The fox is a commission piece, but that doesn’t mean Lewis won’t bring her own experience of foxes to the sculpture.

“The foxes I know get into birds’ nests and chase down the furry critters,” she says. “So I want him skulking around, looking for dinner. I can’t put the bushes around him, but I can show the emotional snapshot of what he’s like.”

Curtis Tierney, of Tierney Fine Art, picked up Lewis as a client in a very unusual way.

“She walked in the front door, and I wasn’t familiar with her work to any great degree,” he says. “She’d brought in a sharp-tailed grouse bronze that day. I typically represent artists with years of experience, mid-career to late-career artists, but with her I saw this raw talent and passion. I actually bought outright the piece she brought in, which is unheard of, because we normally take pieces on consignment. I wanted to offer support for a very deserving and fresh talent.”

When we think of a sporting life artist, past and present, it’s typically a male-dominated field. But Lewis is not pretending to be something she isn’t.

“Liz is the quintessential outdoors woman,” Tierney says. “She’s a passionate, ethical and knowledgeable sportswoman. The people who buy her work are largely men. After they find out what an accomplished sportswoman she is, they have no hesitation — they can see the authenticity in her work.”

And there is no romanticizing in her pieces.

“Her pieces have very innovative compositions and that, married with the fact that she’s a creative thinker artistically, makes for unusual pieces in an attractive fashion,” Tierney says. “For a new artist, she’s doing very well.”

Before Lewis tried her hand at sculpture, she was an avid photographer, which comes across in her ability to portray her subjects just as they are in the field, in life.

“She cultivated an artists’ eye for her subjects with her camera,” Tierney says. “That has enabled her to bring work to the market that is far better than one would expect from her few years of experience.”

Back in Lewis’s studio, up on a shelf, an empty armature waits.

“Oh, that’s going to be a great project,” Lewis says, a big smile changing her face into sheer joy. “My heroine is Annie Oakley and that’s going to be a bronze of her riding her horse flat out with her split skirt and a lever-action rifle.”

In order to get each detail just right, Lewis is currently collecting photographs and videos, books and letters, everything she’ll need to inform her work. Because before she puts a single ounce of clay on the form, she’s going to know Annie Oakley as well as humanly possible without going back in time.



Rod Zullo, a well-respected and talented sculptor, has been mentoring Liz, especially when it comes to the patina process.

“Liz is a perfect example of a person doing what they know best, as opposed to the kind of artist that goes with the trends. She does what’s in her heart,” Zullo says. “She lives it, breathes it. She’s qualified to create the field sporting art she does and she’s truthful about it.”

For Zullo, it’s that kind of honest art, a work that comes from deep within that makes its mark, not just now but for years to come.

“If you really look at her work, you can see she spends time outdoors, observing, being with her dogs, you can tell she’s touched these animals herself, she’s had those animals in her hand,” he says. “Her history of shooting, guiding and hunting has allowed her to be honest and truthful, as opposed to coming out of the academic world. She’s lived her subject, and you can see that connection in her work. It’s from the inside out, not from outside in.”

From Zullo’s perspective Lewis has a distinct style that stands out.

“As she grows and matures, her technique is her own,” Zullo says. “The pointer piece [Good Breaks] and the grouse [First Light] both show the sophistication in her work. It’s hard for an artist at such an early stage in their career to have their work look different from everyone else’s. But she does.” 🐾

Michele Corriel is a frequent contributor to At Home.

