

# ANIMAL INSTINCTS

STEPHEN PAGE is a British artist living and working in rural Mid Wales. He trained at the University of Southampton and today specialises in sculpting minimalist animal forms in bronze through what's known as the lost-wax process. His latest sculptures are on display at REDSEA Gallery at Dempsey Hill.

**What's been your biggest inspiration for your artwork?**

The main one comes from an interest in art and artefacts from throughout human history that reflect our changing relationship with animals.

Although we can never fully understand the reason behind the creation of the cave paintings of aurochs and bison, for instance, they do reflect something of how these hunter-gatherer communities viewed these magnificent wild beasts; they were presumably a large part of their belief systems and maybe respected as another group of equal beings.

As societies became more agriculture-based and the relationship more master/servant, this was reflected in the beliefs, myths and art of those early farming cultures. Animals became further marginalised from our daily life by mechanisation and urbanisation, and the appetite for realistic and dramatic representations of animals in art became more commercially popular.

The sculptures I make draw directly and indirectly on these ideas. The aim of the work, though, is to create sculptures that are both ancient and contemporary, and offer a positive view of our future relationship as we enter into a new era of rewilding, improving animal protection laws and finding a new respect for these magnificent entities that have roamed and toiled alongside us for millennia and helped us get where we are today.

**What's your favourite animal? Is it also your favourite animal to sculpt?**

I'm always drawn to the big powerful mammals and I suppose the ones that we have coexisted with more closely over millennia such as bulls, boars and horses. My favourite one to sculpt is usually the one that I'm working on at the time!



**Can you tell us more about your sculpting process from start to finish?**

For some unexplainable reason, I'm able to make images and sculptures specifically of animals without any direct reference material – I work in an intuitive way until the piece looks and feels right. I start off by sketching, often with no predetermined outcome, until I come up with something that I'm happy to develop into a sculpture.

Next, I make a template of the profile of a piece and transfer this onto a block of dense carving foam, then I cut the profile out on a bandsaw. I then carve the foam to create rounded forms and crisp edges, finally sanding and sealing the surface to create

the completed pattern. This is now ready to be taken to the foundry where a series of stages result in a casting in bronze.

The final part of the creative process involves applying a patina or colour to the sculpture. The bronze is heated with a blow torch and layers of chemicals are applied with a brush to create different hues, tones and textures. Once its cooled, layers of wax are applied and buffed back to protect the patina and give a final finish.

**What's the most enjoyable part of your process? And the most challenging?**

The initial sculpting is the best part. I can completely lose myself in the process as the piece emerges from the block; hours can pass and it's difficult to stop! I try to put the finished pieces to one side for a week or two so I can see it with fresh eyes – anything that needs changing or refining will stand out. I'm usually quite keen for next stage though, as sculpting is just a part of the process. It's not really finished until the piece is cast and patinated.

Patinating can be the most challenging part – and, if it goes well, also the most rewarding. It's a combination of chemistry and art with the aim of creating marbling, mottling and colour that are stable and make each piece sing.

**Why did you start working with bronze?**

A few years after I moved to Wales, I was working as a freelance artist doing commissions and workshops in schools when a job came up at a nearby fine art foundry. There aren't that many foundries around, so for one to be close by in a small village in rural Mid Wales was pretty remarkable. I applied and got an interview, not really knowing what to expect.

It was a small business back then, with only five employees; I was shown around and was instantly hooked – the bronze-casting process was so interesting. Thankfully, I was successful. As it was a small team, I got to work on most of the process; my favourite areas were metalwork and patina, which eventually I specialised in. In my spare time, I would make small sculptures in wax and cast them directly in bronze. This eventually led to the animals that I make today. I'm now a full-time sculptor.



Photography by Lowri Page, Bethan Page and David Roberts



**How has your art developed over time? Have your subjects always been animals?**

At art school, my work was mainly big, heavy, abstract pieces in different materials. Shortly after graduating as part of an artists' residency, I made a fairly abstract, chainsaw-carved bison with real cow horns. I felt it was a fairly successful piece and years later at the foundry I revisited it and made a more refined version in bronze. A lot happened in the years between the two pieces, but I see that original wooden bison as the ancestor of my current work.

**How do you envision your portfolio developing in the five years? How do you think your art might change from today?**

That's a tricky one; one piece often leads to another so it's a slow evolution, really, and you never know which direction things will go. I would like to put some time aside to develop the drawings to complement the sculptures and possibly some printmaking. I'm pretty sure that it will still be animal-based artwork though.

**When you're not sculpting or sleeping, what do you do?**

As well as learning Welsh and going jogging, I have a small veg plot in the garden and try to grow as much as possible in a fairly small space. I have to be organised and plan ahead, but I quite like the challenge; it makes you much more aware of the weather and the changing seasons and what is possible to grow and when. It also makes me much more appreciative of having quality fresh produce to cook with.

**Do you have a favourite artist/sculptor?**

It's probably a toss-up between Tony Cragg and Richard Deacon; they both combine materials in a witty and intuitive way.

**If you hadn't been a sculptor, what path do you think you'd have taken?**

I can't imagine doing anything else!



**What positives have you taken from the current pandemic?**

It may not have been the best timing in the middle of an international pandemic but I was still working part-time at the foundry. I decided it was time to completely cut the cord, give up the secure income and go full-time as an artist. Thankfully, it's working out really well and I get to spend every working day doing what I love. I'm very lucky.

**Can you share with us what makes you happy?**

A happy family life is the best thing ever. I love seeing my children growing up and discovering their own passions and career paths.

On a different tack, I recently found out that in the Netherlands they have been working to recreate the aurochs, the wild ancestors of all modern-day cattle and one of the most important animals in human history. Their aim is to "back breed" from existing cattle that still contain the aurochs' DNA and use them in rewilding areas of natural woodland in Europe where these beasts once roamed wild and were a keystone in maintaining the biodiversity of these ecosystems.

**What's the best piece of advice you've been given, not just in art but in life?**

One of my university lecturers with reference to my work told me to take my sense of humour seriously.

**Lastly, what piece of advice would you give somebody who wants to make a living from art?**

Make your own art, and do it because you want to. It takes time to discover and develop your own voice and language but you need to put the time into experimenting, failing and learning without the pressure of trying to make it pay. *a*

To see Stephen's art at REDSEA Gallery, visit block 9 Dempsey Road, #01-10 Dempsey Hill. 6732 6711 | [redseagallery.com/artists/stephen-page](http://redseagallery.com/artists/stephen-page)