

The Nature OF METAL

With great precision, Harrington artist Rich Baker hammers, cuts and welds sheet metal into lifelike sculptures of animals, machines and people



BY SANDRA WALNECK

PHOTOGRAPHY • CHRIS SETO

A lifelong fascination with wildlife and the ability to recreate the shapes of those creatures using metal has allowed Rich Baker to hammer, cut and shape a niche for himself in the art world.

"I never consider myself an artist. I make things that interest me, that make me excited and that I think are attractive," Baker explains.

Handcrafted entirely from sheet metal, Baker's sculptures are startlingly lifelike. His wife, Jenn, notes that he gravitates toward certain animals and birds. "He is more fascinated with the majestic creatures rather than the cuddly creatures," she says.

Jenn describes his method as "organic." The metal is cut, shaped and welded into a hollow shape;

Rich Baker once managed a welding shop at a GE Canada plant in Guelph. Now he uses those skills to create lifelike sculptures of creatures, machines and people.





Rich Baker is attracted to majestic creatures, not the cuddly kind, says his wife, Jenn, who handles sales and marketing.

there is no cast. “He starts with the nose,” she says. “It is very, very fluid. It just sort of happens.”

It also just happens that his work can have an immediate impact on people, such as Matt Coles, art director of the Algonquin Art Centre near Huntsville. Open from June 1 to mid-October each year, the centre hosts up to 70,000 visitors annually.

Approached by Baker last year to show his work, Coles immediately said no. “By March or April of each year, our artists are pretty much set in stone. He asked me the day before we opened. I said, ‘Sorry, I can’t.’”

But on a whim, he checked Baker’s website. “I called him right back.”

“I overrode the whole selection process,” he says. In 12 years of being in charge of choosing the artists, Coles says he rarely takes on artists who approach him. But his instincts on Baker were correct. “He was the talk of the show last year.”

Coles describes a heron Baker had

made. “People wanted to touch the work. He is creating this soft feeling out of sharp metal.”

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A tour of his tidy workshop allows a visitor to meet animal royalty: a nearly completed lion’s head. With the mouth open in full roar, the attention to detail is meticulous, and purposeful. “I want you to see where his last meal went,” Baker says laughing. “Right down into his gullet.”

Nearby is a life-sized beaver, less menacing, yet no less detailed and precise in its appearance.

But the partially completed bird sculptures are the most fascinating. Their feathers are intricate imitations of the real thing, all cut and shaped individually. There is no template. “I spend a fair bit of my time scratching my head in the hope of getting more efficient. I am figuring out some tricks,” he says. “I’m still a newbie!”

The workshop is on their property in

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Baker makes his sculptures out of sheet metal, which he then cuts and hammers into shape. He can use heat to make the metal more manageable, but finds he can't get the same level of detail that way.

rural Harrington, purchased five years ago. With Jenn working in Stratford at the time and Rich looking to open up a welding business, they wanted to find a country home for themselves and their daughter, Michaela, who was 11 at the time. Rich took one look in the window of the garage that would become his studio and

knew this was the perfect spot. "We love this place," he says. "It is quiet, and we love the house. We've done a fair bit of work and we love old homes."

They embraced the rural lifestyle and are the proud owners of four friendly ducks, Snoopy, Woodstock, Charlie and Lucy, seven chickens and a big rooster named Steve. They plan on installing a pond in the future to enhance their beautiful view.

The Bakers' path to this point has been circuitous, to say the least. Rich, 54, laughs as he describes the many things he has done over the years. He was a musician who spent 13 years on the road with his band, a songwriter, welder and, along with Jenn, owner of a resort near Gravenhurst.

What the couple did not know was that moving to their new home in June 2011 was the first step in Rich's career as an artist.

Prior to that time, the Bakers lived in

Cambridge near the couple's parents and Rich's two grown sons. Rich managed the welding shop at GE Canada's Guelph plant but knew he needed to make a change. "I was running it, but I was twitching. I was needing the outdoors."

"I wanted to set up my own welding shop."

It was a decision Jenn says she fully supported. "Change is not scary," she says. "Scary is staying at something that doesn't bring us joy."

Rich recalls that people laughed at him for leaving such a secure position. "I left to come here and weld farm implements," he explains. His first job was welding a pig trough. Turns out, that would be his last.

"Around the same time, I started on the side these antique nail guys," he recalls. Rich made family figures, musicians — anything that struck him as fun. "I did that for about six months. They were selling



really well through stores."

The nail figures are deceptively simple. Although they have no facial features, Rich has bent and shaped them to depict movement and emotion.

Despite their success, Rich found that keeping up with the demand was taking its toll. "They were making money, but we needed to make lots to make money," he says.

Rich and Jenn Baker have travelled across Canada to showcase his artwork at shows, including Stratford's Art in the Park and Toronto's One of a Kind Show. His artwork is also available at the Algonquin Art Centre in Algonquin Park.



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“I hammered and figured out how to round metal and make it look like an animal.”

Eager for a new challenge, he purchased sheet metal and tried his hand at making small horses. “I wanted them to look real,” he says. “I was ticked at myself because I couldn’t form the metal the way that I wanted.”

But he did not give up. “I hammered and figured out how to round metal and make it look like an animal,” he explains as he points to the small metal horses that are kept to remind him of his effort. They were meant to go on a carousel and they don’t look quite as lifelike as his other sculptures, but they were the beginning of something special.

A commission then came in from a family friend to make a train. The result was a three-truck Shay locomotive that weighed about five kilograms and was arms-length wide. “I made it so it would roll,” he recalls. “I made the people inside, the boiler, the controls (and) the coal. For the framework, I found original drawings to use.”

The client was thrilled. And from there, Baker’s creativity blossomed, along with demand for his work.

Jenn and Rich work as a team. Jenn handles the marketing and sales end of their business to allow Rich the time to devote himself to the creative process. Despite the sacrifices they both have made over the past few years, she knows it is all worth it.

“He is so creative,” says Jenn. “It is just him coming back to where he should have been all along. It is kind of him coming home.”

By challenging himself to make everything from people, to machines, to animals, Rich found an outlet for all the ideas and images he had in his

mind. But having sheet metal as his canvas, the work is time-intensive and physically demanding.

“I try to cold hammer everything,” he explains. “My hands take a beating. I have had tendinitis.” Heat can be used to make the metal more manageable, but it does not achieve the level of detail that makes his sculptures so special.

The early years were arduous. But working seven days a week in the studio and attending art shows was worthwhile because they were doing something they enjoyed.

“Doing something you love is not work,” says Jenn. “Being part of this makes every day a joy.”

Rich’s sculptures range in price from around \$100 for a smaller piece to more than \$10,000 for his larger sculptures. “My wife keeps track of my time,” Rich explains. “We work out our price based on my hours.”

Although the couple has travelled throughout Canada to show Rich’s sculptures, they are most delighted with their success as part of the Art in the Park Show, which runs alongside the Stratford Festival. They love the energy and excitement that comes from meeting people who are interested in the artist and the process.

“For me, that show has brought clientele from all over the world,” says Rich. “I am very fortunate. I see things in my head and I think, ‘I am going to make that.’ And it sells!”

Also satisfying to the couple is knowing where the sculpture is going. “We want to be sure it is going to a happy home,” Jenn says laughing. “Rich’s pieces always seem to find a good ‘forever home.’”

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