

untamed beauty



The Matriarch Comes (19⁷/₁₀x30⁷/₁₀)

Committed to conservation efforts, Australian artist **Steve Morvell** paints wildlife in sensitive pastels that inspire ecological protection—and preservation.

BY MEREDITH E. LEWIS





FOR AUSTRALIAN ARTIST STEVE MORVELL, wildlife art must be actually *wild* for it to convey *life*. Preferring to observe animals on their own terms, he travels the world not only to discover subjects, but to meet them in their home environments. On one such occasion, he was sitting in a tiny rental car in Pilanesberg National Park, in South Africa, observing a herd of young elephants—“I desperately wanted to convey their solid nature, their strength and their massive, sculptural forms,” he says—when he was inadvertently discovered by the 6-ton matriarch of the group. (See *The Matriarch Comes*, on previous page.)

Rather than defend her clan in an aggressive manner, she boxed Morvell into his car so as to prevent him from moving or driving in any direction. As the young elephants made their way to safety, she amused herself by feeding on the surrounding bushes. When she was certain that the herd was hidden and at a safe distance from Morvell, she moved off the car, freeing the artist from his entrapment. “She

taught me a humbling lesson which I won’t forget,” he says. “Know your elephants or leave an exit open.”

Morvell’s paintings assure us that he does indeed know his elephants—and his hippopotami, lions, orangutans, owls and meerkats, to name but a few of his subjects. “It’s a complete mystery to me how any artist could ever expect to do great art without first understanding his or her subject matter,” he says. “It’s very important to me and my art that I paint only those animals I’ve met in person. That way I know what I’m dealing with and hopefully can convey to viewers the real essence of that creature.”

Natural Wonders

Captivated by the incomparable beauty and vulnerability of the natural world, Morvell paints subjects that allow him to tell the story of humankind’s interdependence and the importance of human support for the animal kingdom and its habitats. A tireless supporter and champion of animal rights and ecological stewardship, he hopes to inspire his viewers to



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The Dance of Morning Light (18x19)

join him in conservation efforts worldwide. “Painting wildlife isn’t a choice for me,” he says. “It’s the reason I exist. I have a job to do, and I owe it to all of the animals on our planet to teach people about them and their inalienable right to exist and to belong.

“Humans cannot exist without nature, but nature can do very nicely without us. It’s simply a question of relearning our priorities, and my art is a tool for that,” says Morvell. “If I can grab your attention with my art, then I’ve actually focused your attention on that wildlife. That, in its turn, is the first step in bringing about greater awareness, and thus changes for conservation. It’s only through understanding the interdependence of humans on nature that we can hope to save both it and our little blue planet from the scourge of human ignorance and arrogance.”

Morvell repeatedly asks himself “the why question” during the painting process: Why am I creating this particular painting—and what do I want it to say to my viewer? The exercise keeps him grounded and is among the first of the lessons he teaches his



A Flash of Wings (20x14³/₈)



Golden Light (15 $\frac{7}{10}$ x11 $\frac{2}{5}$)

A VANISHING SUBJECT

Steve Morvell has been passionate about wildlife and conservation his entire life, and he finds it crucial to not only have “met” his subjects in their natural habitat, but to be aware of what the future holds for them. “It’s estimated that total tiger numbers in the wild have decreased from about 50,000 in 1900 to less than 3,000 currently,” says Morvell. “Three sub-species became extinct last century, and total wild tiger numbers are still falling due to poaching and competition with increasing human numbers.

“The Bengal tiger—the most numerous remaining of all tiger subspecies—mostly inhabits the dry and wet deciduous forests of Central and South India, the Terai-Duar grassland and sal forests of the Himalayan foothills, and the temperate forests of Bhutan. The mangroves of the Sunderban (shared between Bangladesh and India) are the only mangrove forests where tigers are found. Some animal experts tell us that tigers will effectively vanish from the wild in the next couple of decades if nothing is done to halt the decline.”

students. “If I can’t answer that simple question right at the beginning, then I’ll have no idea of what I’m trying to do,” he says. “It’s such a small question, but so crucial to the final outcome. In both art and life, if you wish to make any sort of journey, you first need to know where you want to go. Otherwise, as the Chinese say, ‘If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there.’”

The artist’s gut instinct plays a significant role in all of his paintings, from his choice of subject to its place and color expression on the page. Morvell often finds that less—less design, less calculation, less premeditation—is more, and bases his compositions on raw intuition. “I have what I call ‘Steve’s inverse law of artistic success,’ which says, ‘The more time spent consciously thinking about an artwork, the less successful it will be.’ In other words, I favor artistic spontaneity and vigor over intellectual content,” he says.

Morvell avoids entering the wild with the expectation of finding a particular subject for a painting, citing that “nature never runs according to script.” Instead, he positions himself in far-flung, out-of-the-way places and allows life to simply take its course. “The only thing constant in nature is change, so the challenge for me is to go into nature with an open mind, being aware and alert to whatever the animals are doing and to what’s happening,” he says. “If you spend enough time truly ‘seeing,’ you’ll eventually come across amazing things.”

Calling himself a *reactor* instead of a creator, Morvell also allows that wildlife seems to make its own decisions about how it’s placed and framed (or composed) in an artwork. “I go into the natural world, and I move through it with awareness, and react to what I experience,” he says. “The animals do what they’ve always done, and I simply respond when something triggers my artistic senses.”

Educational Field Trips

Morvell discovered soft pastels in 1984. Although he works in other media, he especially enjoys the range of pigments available in pastels, and often makes use of a split complimentary color system that plays with the charge between warm and cool colors. Patterns and shadows, rhythm and repetition of shapes and motifs, frequently find their way into his works, creating a desired harmony as well as a path



King of the Forest (25x19)

for the viewer's eye. Many paintings also reflect his interest in the play of light and shadow, mood and atmosphere, and finally, his sculptural training. "To me the three-dimensional 'reality' of any painting is what I strive so hard to make believable," he says. "Painting, in any case, is just a trick of the eye, but I still want you to believe what you're looking at is real—since, in actuality, it is."

Despite having four years of university training in the fine arts, Morvell stresses the importance of another kind of instructor. "Nature will teach me if I pay attention," he says. To date, he has visited Africa and China several times, as well as Nepal, Thailand, Indonesia and most of the Australian outback. On these extended field trips he keeps a daily journal, wherein he captures those ideas that are freshest in his mind. Finding that photography has its limits, he also maintains a travel sketchbook to record, in pen and ink, those details the camera may miss.

Nevertheless, since wildlife is rarely sitting still, he does take scene and detail shots with a high-end digital camera, to complement his sketches. "All of these things combine to evoke solid memories when I'm back in my comfy studio and truly enable me to paint with the authority of first-hand knowledge," he says. "The most important thing is the fact that I have actually been there; those memories will inform everything I do back in the studio."

Back at home in Australia, Morvell skips preliminary design work and flies right into painting.

VIEW MORE OF THE ARTIST'S CONSERVATION-INSPIRED PASTELS AT WWW.ARTISTSNETWORK.COM/MEDIUM/PASTEL/STEVE-MORVELL-GALLERY.

Working entirely from his own material, he establishes his dark underpainting first, in the manner of a tonal sketch, on paper taped to an upright easel. Here, before color, he works to resolve underlying forms, angles and positive and negative shapes. "To me, the values are far and away the most critical element in designing a successful artwork," he says. "Sixty percent of the final art will hang on a good, strong value structure and also a solid awareness of the positive and negative shapes. If I get those things right, the rest will pretty much take care of itself." Later, with the bones of the picture well in place, he allows detail to emerge—but sparingly. "Wall-to-wall



detail will never make for an interesting artwork," he says. "Every painting needs some mystery—places where viewers can invest something of themselves." Such objectives can be seen in the wings of the Wedgetailed eagle that float into the bold strokes of the background in *Warrior Queen* (above).

Morvell's paintings are remarkable for their intense immediacy, close-up perspective and portrait-like qualities. Backgrounds may convey scene information, or they may not, but detail always resides squarely in and with the subject. One immediately senses that he's not just painting animals, but rather individuals. "I'm trying to pull

Warrior Queen
(18½ x 26½)



you in close, so you can look deep into the soul of my critter,” he says. “If I move you to awareness, I’ve achieved my goal.” Perhaps the strength of Morvell’s painting lies in that final word, for it would seem that it’s his own soul—and passion for calling others to join him in stewardship—that also shines forth in these painted evocations of living natural beings. As Morvell confesses of his vocation, “It’s only in nature that I feel truly whole and at peace.” 🍷

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A fine arts graduate of the University of Ballarat, in Victoria, Australian artist **Steve Morvell** (www.stevemorvell.com) is a signature member of Artists for Conservation and the Wildlife Art Society of Australasia, from which he has won many awards, including three gold medals. Morvell exhibits his work internationally, and his art is represented in public, private and corporate collections around the world—among them, Horsham Regional Art Gallery, in Victoria; Halls Gap studio-gallery, in Australia’s Grampians National Park, where he teaches regular workshops; and in Sydney, at Veronica Boer International Fine Art.