

STORY AND ARTWORK BY *TIMOTHY F. PROSS*

THE ARTIST'S JOURNEY

Let one Iowan's story of overcoming life's challenges inspire you to never give up and always strive towards your dreams.

Snow began to fall through the dimly fading light of the late evening cloud-covered sky. It was a typical early Iowa spring day and Old Man Winter had yet to relinquish his icy grip and concede defeat in a battle he was destined to lose to the oncoming warmth and renewal of spring.

As I hiked, I pondered how these two forces of nature often wage war this time of year. For eons, I suppose, back until the dawn of time. Like two spoiled brats, each wanting it their way, both trying to tip the sands of the hourglass in their favor in this never-ending weather feud. I was very familiar with these seasonal confrontations. Often I was out in the middle of them, stuck on the battlefield, immersed in nature's reoccurring tug of war.

I carefully crept along as light snow, riding on blustery wind gusts, tried to obscure my ability to negotiate the topography of the land. Temperatures were definitely starting to drop. With every exhale my breath billowed out before me, mimicking the low-lying misty clouds aimlessly drifting by.

Seeing an eagle in flight can be awe-inspiring. Combine this with Iowa's beautiful sunsets, and you have the conceptual basis for the painting, *Sunset Flight*, by Timothy Pross of Atlantic.



In his painting *Solidarity—Wolf Pack*, artist Timothy Pross realized “the whole painting could be viewed as an abstract representation of a sheet of music. The aspen trees are bars surrounding the notes, which are the wolves sounding off across the page.”

In Search of Eagles

I followed a well-worn trail meandering through a mixture of hilly pasture grassland and scattered small wooded areas that surrounded several ponds. Cloaked in snowfall and using as much stealth as I could muster, I ventured in farther than I ever had before, using the terrain to keep cover between me and my quarry. With trail’s end in sight and breathing heavily, I trudged up the last hill. All the while cursing the fool that first characterized this land as “gently rolling hills.” In my humble opinion, they were steep enough to be aptly named a “goat ranch.” Upon reaching my destination I crouched low, trying to catch my breath, preparing to peer over the ridge with binoculars in hand.

My mission was to sight the nest without detection. I thought I had a pretty good chance of achieving this goal. I figured if I couldn’t see them on my trek in, then surely, they couldn’t see me...right? Knowing that fortune favors the brave, I cautiously poked my head up just enough to see over

the ridge. With anticipation, I slowly raised the binoculars and peered through. To my astonishment, staring right back was the mated pair of bald eagles I had observed the last 3 years—I was busted!

Bald eagle sightings were such a rare occurrence for me growing up in southwest Iowa. Even today, with their numbers increasing throughout Iowa, it still puts me in awe every time I spot one.

The encounter became a contest to see who would blink first. With my eyes starting to water from stinging cold wind, I lowered the binoculars in submission, no longer able to compete with their unrelenting gaze. My tunnel vision removed, I absorbed the whole scene in panoramic splendor.

The dominant force in this visual play unfolding before me was the majestic eagle pair on center stage. They sat stoically perched, ever vigilant, surveying their surroundings. Low-lying misty clouds drifted in and out of view, as if commanded by a director’s cue. The light veil of snow and ever-increasing

darkness threatened to march forward with the final act—inevitably lowering the curtain and bringing an end to this outdoor amphitheater.

Knowing this special moment was brief, I let all my senses soak up as much as possible. I tried to let the scene burn into my memory banks, hopefully to draw upon later for inspiration.

In winter, eagles must conserve energy to maintain body heat and if they are scared, they waste valuable energy with flight. They must not be disturbed or approached closer than 400 yards for perched eagles. Hence my binoculars.

Not wanting to upset the pair, I slowly backed down the ridge and started my trek back to my family cabin, where my wife and son are no doubt comfortable and warm in its sheltering embrace. It was obvious who was winning this seasonal battle today as Old Man Winter, refusing to concede, picked up the snow globe and gave it one more violent shake, turning a light snowfall into almost blizzard conditions.

While trying to retrace my steps in the ever-growing darkness and the trail quickly disappearing under a blanket of white with each step, my thoughts turned to the eagle pair. Researchers say eagles mate for life. If this exceptional trait is indeed true, then I have admired the same pair for three years. Their bond forged by the day-to-day struggles they face together to survive and raise the next generation. It is the survival of these hardships within the circle of life, that make the pair inseparable.

I am an artist in nature.

This eagle encounter was inspiration for my painting titled, *Inseparable—Bald Eagle Pair*.

Since childhood, I've always been happiest when actively exploring nature. I still carry that childlike sense of wonder when exploring. I have a multitude of wild encounters stored in my memory banks which have become part of my DNA. Every time I create a piece of art, the spirit of these experiences is the inspiration.

My artistic journey started at a young age, when my kindergarten teacher asked me to create a backdrop for our class play about Noah's Ark. I drew and painted the Ark and all of the animals as they marched two-by-two to board. I can remember my teacher telling me that I should be an artist. For most of my early childhood, with my mother's encouragement, I drew, sketched or colored.

But the same thing happened to me that happens to most young boys. I became far too energetic (my mom called it antsy) to sit down after school and focus on art. I wanted to play sports with friends, go hunting and fishing with my dad and be outside exploring nature.

I was blessed to have grown up in a small town in rural southwest Iowa. As I have gotten older and reflect on that time, I realize more just how special a place Iowa is. I was always no more than a bike ride away from the great outdoors. Friends and I spent most of our free time after school and summers exploring nearby woodlands, building forts and wading the clear, shallow waters of the Nishnabotna River. These childhood adventures bestowed a great appreciation for nature and all things wild, deeply impacting and formulating the person I am today. Although I'd still draw and sketch now and then, the restless spirit of a rambunctious boy pushed my artistic endeavors to the wayside.

Inspiration to Severe Injury

Then in my late twenties, the spark for art re-ignited. My path beyond high school led me to Iowa State University where I earned a degree in architecture. While architecture and design drew upon my creative side, in the back of my mind I thought about art.

By chance, I heard of an art exhibit and presentation in Des Moines from a well-known wildlife artist. I was curious how he combined things I was very passionate about—wildlife and nature—together with art.

The experience left me awestruck. Here was an artist whose work focused on wildlife and nature that surpassed simple photographic renderings I'd seen before. This was art with a capital "A". It awakened my passion, as only art expressed through the visual wonder of nature and great outdoors could.

After hearing his presentation to several thousand people, and seeing his original works, I left thinking maybe I could do the same thing. I bought painting supplies the next day and excitedly got started.

But life threw a curveball like it so often does. In the span of one week, I experienced two unfortunate accidents. First, I fell out of a tree and a few days later I was hit head-on in an auto collision.



"When I look at a snow-covered field I don't just see a harsh, desolate environment devoid of life. For me, the emptiness creates an almost Zen-like beauty," says Pross. This, combined with a beautiful red-tailed hawk, inspired his painting *Wintertide—Red-Tailed Hawk*.

It was a week that changed life's journey. I had broken ribs from the tree fall and the head-on collision left me with a debilitating back injury.

I spent a couple of years primarily laying on the floor looking for pain relief. After seeing an exhausting list of medical professionals, I had no relief. Any hope of painting was long gone. I struggled to simply get through the day.

Time passed. Slowly I recovered enough to sit at a desk and with very little movement and the click of a mouse, continued my architectural career. I remember thinking to make the best of the situation. Although I can't paint right now, I can sit at a computer and perform architectural design. While dreams of becoming an artist was pushed to the wayside, compositions of future artwork continued to develop in my mind.

Anyone with invisible back injury can attest to the struggle of everyday life, where one wrong move can create days or weeks of pain. However, life took a step in the right direction when a chiropractor taught me how to release tension and strengthen injured muscles. I was encouraged to return to the gym to regain my former strength and fitness.

While not an overnight fix, gradually I could focus less on pain and start to enjoy life again. I began to build stamina required to sustain a painting posture. The paints came back out of the box.

Embracing 2,000 Mistakes

Today, as a self-taught artist with no formal training, I go through a lot of trial and error as I teach myself how to paint. There is a famous saying of art teachers: "if you want to learn

how to draw, you have to make 2,000 mistakes, so get busy and start making them." This is exactly what I do every day.

As an artist, I constantly try to refine my work down to just those elements needed to create strong composition and elicit emotion. Memorable works are achieved from "less is more."

The work of artists I greatly admire have indescribable, elusive qualities. Words to interpret each piece inevitably fall short. Beyond strong compositional elements, there is something intangible about each piece that makes it hard to explain "why I like this...but I do."

These works are not just stimulating visual experiences, but something I respond to emotionally. Their innate ability to transport viewers into the moment depicted, make it seem so real—life like. It's these elusive intangibles that evoke emotional responses that I strive to incorporate.

As I sit at my easel, I am currently working on a kestrel hovering over a grassy field. It is a scene etched into my memory and one I've witnessed many times on my family's piece of rural Iowa.

It is mid-day, in the middle of a hot Iowa summer, the sky is a vibrant shade of blue with clouds of various size and shape drifting by on a voyage with a destination known only to them.

I depart from the comfortable shade and protection of our cabin porch and set off walking along one of our mowed paths that winds aimlessly through our meadow. I have an appointment to keep. As I walk, I observe, letting my mind's eye soak in images to send them to that mysterious storage bank I access later for inspiration.

I soak in the color variations of the tall grasses which





modulate from tannish brown to vibrant green, depending on which generation you look at. This time of year, Queen Anne's lace is a dominant visual force with its flower resembling an exquisite white doily floating above the grass. I see the yellows of flowers randomly strewn about as if Tinker Bell and her raucous clan spilled pixie dust on a late-night fly by. I notice purplish blossom of prairie ironweed, whose seductive siren call is enticing several butterflies floating by to stop and investigate.

I glance skyward and see my neighborhood kestrel has kept our mid-day appointment. I recognize this little falcon as the strikingly beautiful, resident male. He is trying to hover in search of lunch. I watch as winds become gusty and he teeters up and down. With each gust, he goes horizontal. As the wind abruptly dies, he is dropped to a vertical position, fighting to hover horizontally again. As I watch him struggling to hover, I think how his actions reflect the ups and downs in our lives.

Although I started this artist's journey later in life than hoped, I feel very fortunate to have the opportunity to paint. You have to play the cards you are dealt in life. Everybody has struggles or obstacles to overcome. Life will often try to knock you down, but you must fight to get back up.

My life has shown me that with patience and perseverance, a lot of hard work, faith and a never-give-up attitude you can reach your goals. Most importantly, I have been blessed with strong support and thoughtful encouragement from my wife (my college sweetheart) and our son, plus a legion of caring family, friends and art enthusiasts.

For this painting, I have chosen to show the kestrel in his vertical position, as he is fighting to hover...fighting to get back up.

I am an artist in nature...and this is my journey. 🦅



LEFT: In nature, rarely can a scene be absorbed without looking up and down. Pross wanted to replicate this physical process in *Summer Meadow—Kestrel*. To do so, this canvas is 2 by 8 feet. Upon first view, heads go up and down with smiles on faces. ABOVE: Inspiration for *Winter White—Snowy Owl* came from an owl sighting on a hike where the owl lifted off and silently glided into falling snow to vanish from sight.



Iowa Artist a Finalist in International Competition

A painting by Timothy F. Pross of Atlantic, entitled "Wintertide — Red-Tailed Hawk" was selected last winter into the distinguished list of finalists in an international competition of 5,000 entries from artists in 87 countries. The competition, run by the Art Renewal Center in New York, is the largest and most prestigious competition in the Americas for realist artists. Earlier, the painting made the cut in the animal category as a semi-finalist.

"In a competition of this caliber, being selected a semi-finalist was a huge accomplishment," says Pross. Upon learning that the judges moved his painting into the distinguished list of finalists, Pross was "both honored and speechless."

Realistic Painting: A Labor of Love His method of creating extremely realistic wildlife renderings is a labor of love. Studying each animal's physical attributes and understanding its connection to its habitat comes from years spent in nature and a keen sense of observation.

Pross says he is living a dream as a full-time artist. His love of nature and wildlife fuels his drive.

"I'm just happy to be able to paint," he says. As a young man, a traumatic back injury left him unable to sustain a painting posture. After decades of working towards recovery, he sits at his easel with enormous gratitude. "The support and encouragement of so many wonderful people has helped me have the faith, patience and perseverance to get to this point—it is not a journey I could have done alone."

Pross likes the challenge and complexity of painting large scale. One piece is nearly 4 by 7 feet.

His art seeks the "elusive, intangible qualities—the ones that evoke an emotional response. I paint what I feel inspired to create."

View his work at Prosswildlifeart.com.