

# Montana Quarterly

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# THE SERIAL ART OF JERRY CORNELIA

Little did Cornelia suspect that moving home to Sidney would mean surviving flood, fire and pestilence in pursuit of art

BY ALAN KESSELHEIM  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE



IN 1985, WHEN JERRY CORNELIA MADE THE LEAP FROM HIS HOME town of Sidney, Mont., to New York City, he wanted nothing more than to be the best mannequin painter in the business.

"I loved that job," he says. "I pestered them until they hired me, then I got really good at it. I practiced at home after work. I painted so hard I had to soak my arms in ice every night."

Cornelia loved the finite tangibility of the work. One mannequin at a time. Do the job, set the figure aside, move to the next one. Jerry figures he painted upwards of 17,000 mannequins. He got fast. He got good. He got noticed.

"After a while I was asked to do some big gigs. Mannequins for Saks Fifth Avenue, Christmas displays, shows for Calvin Klein. Hell, I made enough money for the down payment on a house on Long Island in one three-day weekend painting mannequins and doing displays."

Then some big name trendsetter decided that mannequins were out of fashion and demand went off a cliff. Cornelia was abruptly laid off, then briefly hired back as a mid-level manager.

EDNA TOOK  
CRAP OFF  
NOBODY





“Problem was, I was much better with mannequins than with real people,” he remembers. “Quality control was a bitch. I was too much of a perfectionist.”

In short order he was another starving artist in an expensive city. He sold his sculptures on street corners at \$90 a pop. For a while he made fancy, hand-painted birdhouses adorned with architectural details Cornelia picked up at antique shows and flea markets. Some were showcased in Soho art galleries and sold for \$600 to \$700.

“People would spend \$600 on an artsy birdhouse and then nail it to a tree in their yard,” Cornelia said. “Now that’s a different take on money.”

He moved in the currents of big-city energy and creative buzz for a decade before his

father, back in Sidney, got sick. Cornelia mentioned the possibility of moving home to help out, and his parents jumped at it. In 1995 Cornelia returned to the small town along the Yellowstone River where he’d grown up. He returned to sugar beet fields, oil rigs, friends he’d gone to grade school with, sweeping skies and winter blizzards. A town where art boutiques are as scarce as sushi, where neighbors drive Dodge Rams and ride horses and would no more pay \$700 for a birdhouse than show up naked for work.

“I didn’t know it at the time,” Cornelia says, “but when I moved back I bought my freedom. The only thing I really miss about New York is the great food.”

“In New York the energy is a force in the air, like weather,” Cornelia admits, “but it is also very confining. Everyone is in their little box, their limited genre. Out here



ESTELLE

it's a void I have to fill, but there is no one telling me what I should be doing, either."

The other surprise is that Cornelia's art, with its persistent detours into the surreal and absurd, has more to do with the influences of a childhood in Sidney than with his tenure in New York. Influences like the fact that his father was the town sheriff and the Cornelia house was also the jail. That Jerry had to go through the women's cell in order to get to his bedroom.

"Whenever we had a prisoner, I had to drop down through the trap door in the kitchen, go through the basement, and pop back up in my room," he recalls.

He would serve breakfasts, cooked to order by his mother, to the inmates. Cornelia remembers the exquisite irony of delivering a breakfast tray to one of his teachers who had been picked up the night before on a drunk-and-disorderly charge.

"Those were my Opie years," Cornelia laughs, although he's the first to admit that his childhood was less than Andy-of-Mayberry innocent.



FINALLY SEEING CLEARLY



YEAH, I'M A BITCH

"Sheriff's and preacher's kids are always the wildest," Cornelia claims. "I remember getting drunk with the preacher's daughter up in the church balcony. Who was going to catch us there?"

One of his early mentors was an uncle who lives out near Jordan, and who was in tight with the Freeman bunch.

"He knows all those guys," Cornelia says. "He may be a little whacky on the political side, but he showed me a lot when it came to painting."

Cornelia's grandmother was also artistic, and his father had hidden talent that was overwhelmed by the demands of a life that required him to quit school after eighth grade to work on the family farm.

Cornelia's creative appetite flourished in spite of the fact that he grew up in a cultural backwater without art schools. From an early age art bubbled up from his inner well. At the age of 5 he painted circus wagons on big squares of paper he taped to the walls. He doodled eyes on the margins of his schoolwork, a practice that probably didn't hurt when it came time to paint mannequins. To this day, besides a couple of night courses, Cornelia has no formal art education. He remembers other, more pragmatic, limitations.

"Paper was precious when I was a kid," Cornelia says. "I don't know why my parents couldn't just go buy a ream. How much could that cost? But I had to scrounge paper wherever I could. I remember what a score it was when people gave me pieces of that great, shiny cardboard from store-bought shirts."



YOU THINK I'M A BITCH

That resourcefulness fueled Cornelia's art projects through the decades, and it is reflected in his willingness to experiment and explore. His artistic sweep runs the gamut from chicken neckties to painted roof shingles to sculpted busts mounted on antique piano legs. He tends to stick with series. As for technique, he finds his way as the problems present themselves.

His "Coco" series was inspired by a friend with that nickname who died of AIDS. Then there's "The Adventures of the Yellow Ball" series, paintings with a yellow rubber ball somewhere in the frame. After his fancy birdhouse phase, Cornelia had a fling with painted clocks.

"I'll get an idea in my head and then I just keep trying different ways to make it happen," Cornelia says. He points to a painting, one of his "cat series," set in a scene full of shiny marble. "Mostly I wanted to see if I could make marble glow."

"And I steal styles from the best of them," he asserts. "When I see something I like, I use it. The way the light comes from the upper left in a Rembrandt, somebody else's trees, whatever."

"I can't stand the artsy-fartsy talk," Cornelia shudders. "All that conceptual art crap should be left on the cocktail napkins it gets doodled on. It tires me out."

While he has little patience for the pretentious themes people read into art, Cornelia is completely serious about the mechanics of his work — the way light illuminates a scene, the touchy business of balance in a composition, the set up of negative space. His paintings radiate a crisp clarity, an attitude, a unique mix of meticulous reality and existential juxtaposition. They jump at you, pull you towards them. His sculptures are rich with nuance — a beautiful woman's face, the

curve of a horse's neck, the sense of motion frozen in momentary check. And never far from view, his deep awareness of the absurd and comic, even in the most serious subjects.

After Cornelia's father died, his mother's health declined. She suffered from Alzheimer's disease, and eventually had to live in an extended-care facility, where she existed in a netherworld of paranoia, out of touch with family, without memories or bearings, frustrated and angry much of the time. Cornelia painted a portrait of his mother wearing prison stripes, an old lady with anguish and anger beaming from her like heat, leading an uprising. The painting is titled, "Little Fay Seemed an Unlikely Candidate to Lead the Revolt."

Most of his pieces bear lengthy, irreverent, and sometimes R-rated, titles. "Relationship angst makes for really good material," he laughs.

A painting of a blue-haired man/monkey with an apple held out in his hand is titled, "The Time had Come for the Blue Monkey Boy to Make up his Mind."

"I've been doing a set of candlesticks with titles so long they're like short stories," he says.



IDA WASN'T SURE

"I think it was Tina Turner who said that you either gotta be best, be first, or be different," Cornelia adds.

In the case of much of Cornelia's art, you'd have to check all those boxes. And yet, he makes it sound like his successes are happenstance, more of a right time, right place thing than a measure of his skill and vision. Like anyone's birdhouses could end up in art galleries in Manhattan, or as if he just happened to be in the right place to get the jobs with Saks.

But it didn't come easily when he first returned from New York. Cornelia was healing from a relationship breakup. His father was dying. He didn't have a studio. He spent months getting his bearings, reacclimatizing.

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He eventually got a studio organized in back of his grandmother’s old house and his productive energy kicked in. Years of paintings and sculptures piled up. He got picked up by galleries, recognized around the country. Then a faulty valve in a propane tank blew and his entire studio burned to the ground.

“I lost 60 paintings and 60 sculptures,” he says. “I remember going back in and sifting through the ashes. One of the only things that survived was a notepad with the words ‘Shit Happens’ scrawled on a page.”

After the fire, Cornelia bought a small house north of town on a postage stamp of land. He started remodeling a mudroom

into his new studio and getting back to work. Last July a freak microburst storm cell hit. The wind ripped the studio roof right off the house and hurled it across the yard. Torrential rains followed, filling up the room with water.

“I was sweeping waves of water out the door,” he says. “The basement filled up like a swimming pool. That really set me back. I watched a lot of television, and I’m a TV junkie to begin with. I’ve finally gotten the roof fixed, got some things on the easel again, but it’s still a mess. Now I’ve had fire and flood, I figure grasshoppers are probably next!”

Cornelia is in his mid-50s. Eight years ago he survived a heart attack. He has thought about mortality some. He has the gravel voice of a man who smokes two packs of Old Golds a day. Except for a stud earring and stacks of silver rings on his fingers, he looks the part of someone who grew up in Sidney. Cowboy boots, blue jeans, the firm handshake, subdued waves to other drivers on the road.

He lives alone on a quiet road in a house cluttered with his art, with piano legs, spindles, and fancy details from caskets stacked on the porch waiting for a project, a fresh cat painting on the easel, sculptures on the dining room table. He doesn’t like to travel, says he sucks at marketing. “Anyway, I know how I like my coffee.”

“I used to be very disciplined,” he says. “I worked from noon to eight non-stop. These days it’s less focused. I have to make time for Judge Judy. Things come up. And I’m still getting over the flood.”

Outside the weeping willows stir in the ceaseless wind. Two horses, an appaloosa and a quarter horse, stand in a small enclosure.

He steps through the sliding door onto the porch. “Here’s my nags,” he says, warmth in his voice. He walks through the gate, nuzzles up to the horses, strolls around them. Then he shakes the apple tree so fruit thuds to the ground. The horses nose them along before lipping them up.

“Expensive lawn mowers is all,” he says. Then the truth comes out. “They’re my inspiration.”

While his landscapes and most of his animals take substantial liberties with realism, his horses are



LITTLE FAY

scrupulously accurate, searingly correct. They are also full of reverence. "It's a respect thing," he says. "I don't know what it is about horses, but I can't mess with them."

When it comes to deciphering the twisting path of his career, Cornelia blames the random nature of what comes along combined with a few self-imposed rules.

"Recently people have been asking me why I changed my color palette," he says. "It's because Ben Franklin in town had a huge sale and I picked up tons of a few colors. It's not about my palette, it's about me being cheap."

As for his rules, none of his paintings have actual eyes, and the startling thing is that you don't notice their absence until it gets pointed out.

"When I do eyes, that's all I see," Cornelia says. "And it just takes me back to all that doodling I did in school."

All of his women have flaming red hair. In his cat paintings, the light always shines in from the left.

Rules or not, anything seems possible for the next project. Cornelia wants to get back to sculptures again. He's been thinking about some large-scale horse paintings. He is working on a chrome-coated cat, mostly to see if he can pull off the effect.

"The thing I'd really like," he says, suddenly, "is to see one of my pieces on the Antique Road Show. I'm waiting for that. But with my luck it'd end up being one of those damn chicken neckties. I know they're coming back to haunt me." ■



EASY ITCH



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