

# WILD KINGDOM

## Southwest Art Magazine

By Derek James

Brad Rude, in the western tradition, is a storyteller. But he spins a different kind of tale, one that requires imagination and curiosity. In his bronze, wood, and found-object sculptures of wildlife, created with a flair for mechanical whimsy, and in his deceptively simple paintings, Rude captures crossroads, experiments in progress, the interplay of the familiar with the unfamiliar. Reality, history, time, space, through a blender, if you will. He renders animals in extreme detail in the tradition of the western masters he admires. Then he places them at the center of a surreal, emotional world. The animals are usually a comforting frame of reference, his way of saying, "There's nothing scary here." Once you're there, though, you see situations turned on their heads. Many of his sculptures incorporate basic man-made tools like the wagon, bucket, wheel, canoe, and tractor, in conjunction with animals that are conducting their own investigations. If you're risk-adverse or in a hurry, you will focus on the detailed rendering. If you are up to taking it in with a wider lens you may ask: What does that seashell have to do with the yak? Why is that horse with a peg leg trying to cross a river? Will he make it? Is he afraid? Going home? How did that rhino get in that predicament, teetering on a slab with a boulder propped on its head and held in place by a flimsy stick? How will it get out of that? Rude is happy to explain what it means to him, but don't you want to do your own exploring? That's what he is doing, still opening doors at age 38, to see what could possibly be inside. Every artist reflects his or her work, and Rude is no exception. He's trim, a rough-hewn strong, and prefers his sandy hair, from head to goatee, cropped close. He's direct, cordial, and plainspoken. He has a wife, Jayne, and two precocious little children. He rises early, dons a wide-brimmed hat, and tends to a few head of cattle and mules on his 20-acre spread in the foothills of Washington state's Blue Mountains. From there, he looks across a valley of lush farmland toward the small town of Walla Walla, tucked in the state's southeastern corner. He was born in Montana and spent part of his childhood in Alaska, but Walla Walla has been home since grade school. BRAD RUDE That's the simple view. Take a wide view of Rude, though, and you get more than an artistic guy from the Pacific Northwest who might be a distant cousin of actor Keith Carradine's, he looks so much like him. He is a tinker, a mechanic, an aficionado of old machinery and memorabilia, a collector of old photos and books on the West, art, science, and animals. He's got display cases that hold microscopes, globes, molecule models, and skeleton pieces. He loves gizmos, but more specifically, he loves figuring them out. He relishes having wilderness as his back yard, but more specifically the sense that he's not sure exactly what wild animals are on the other side of the rise. His studio yields clues of experiments: first- and second-draft paintings on the walls and sculptures that range from elegant to contraptions, including one powered by a miniature gas boiler. You see clever mechanisms, cabinetry-based efforts, classic bronze work, plenty of surprising connections among animals, art, human invention, and above all else, questions of "what if." Rude began his artistic journey in the mid-1980s, right out of Walla Walla High School. Since, he has been awarded endowments and public commissions, including an Artist Fellowship Award from the National Endowment for the Arts, and enjoys steady gallery showings. His sculptures are included in the collections of Microsoft, Nordstrom, the Oregon Zoo, and the Boise Art Museum. "I see myself," he says, more serious than pretentious, "as sort of an inventor-scientist. An artist's main job is exploration." You could make a case that Rude's work is somewhere between western realism, abstract openness, and the notebook of an anthropologist in "The Twilight Zone." His bronze sculptures often begin with a vague notion and random objects. He mixes and matches and watches where the story leads him. To demonstrate, he grabs five objects from a wall of drawers: a clay figure of a horse, a ball, a pressure gauge, an anvil, and a skeletal hand. He regards the horse first, since it's the protagonist in this impromptu story. "Hmm, he looks ticked off ... let's put the hand around his throat ... nah, too violent..." He puts the anvil on its head. Maybe that's the source of anger, perhaps a little red paint would be appropriate. He rejiggers things for a minute or two before he ends this little game of Mr. Potato Head as quickly as it started. He gets his point across: Use imagination, be open-minded and don't think yourself into mental paralysis. WHATS OUT THERE, BRONZE, 41 x 28 x 14 Barely 10 miles from his home, a cast bronze dog balances on its nose a brick, apple, and rock while standing on a Walla Walla street corner. You get the basic picture a block away, but close up you see it is tattooed, or scrimshawed, with all kinds of images: a bone, a basket of grain, swirls, and other images, including a blue heron. "I imagine the imagery being related to this dog, not all dogs, but this particular individual," he says. "All animals have their own personalities. The bone may be generic, but why is the blue heron there? Maybe the dog's dreaming about one, maybe it's a personal friend. Maybe they hang out by the pond together every afternoon. It's there for people to make connections and have fun with." Rude fell in love with old things when he was 8 years old. It started with a trip to a museum where he was given a wood-tipped arrow. He soon set up his own museum in his bedroom, complete with lit display case showing coins, rusted tools, and wooden boxes. He learned the rudiments of three-dimensional folk art from his grandfather, who lovingly and laboriously carved stagecoaches and horse-drawn wagons for his grandchildren and for sale. The young Rude was an unofficial apprentice and learned from his grandfather how to build model windmills from cast-off metal. Rude loved riding bicycles, too, as all kids do, but he so enjoyed fixing them that he had his own basement repair shop. That mechanical fascination became an integral part of his work. A mule stands on an old wood wagon platform and nestles inside a rudimentary steam-powered

contraption that perfectly fits around the animal. Perhaps the mule is tired of walking and packing. Perhaps the mule built this, or maybe it inspired humans to find alternative ways of moving stuff. Like much of Rude's work, the sculpture has a clean, blue-collar sensibility and is both simple and complex. It fits right into Rude's studio, a schizophrenic combination of precise organization, celebration of history and gadgets, and laboratory of art in progress. There are books neatly standing in rows or splayed open, some filled with the work of western art masters: Charlie Russell's fluid touch, Thomas Moran's grand panoramas, and the experiments of "animaliers"—pioneers who chronicled the beasts of the Wild West. RUDE IS A PROLIFIC PAINTER TOO, UPPER LEVEL, OIL, 10 x 8. Rude hasn't always operated so independently. For a while he went to work for the Walla Walla Foundry—a resource so remarkable for a little town close to nowhere that it attracts famed sculptors like Jim Dine and Deborah Butterfield. As a patina technologist and a metal worker at the foundry, he worked closely with Dine, Nancy Graves, and other top sculptors. He learned techniques, ways around problems, new approaches. Most of all, he says, what he learned from those artists is the importance of trusting creative instincts. He still consults with the foundry and produces his bronze molds there. One of his sculptures rests in the foundry courtyard. It shows a life-size bronze mule trotting on an old wooden-wheeled platform. Atop the mule is a rainbow of animals and objects. If that isn't enough to peruse, the mule is engraved with images as well. It is all simple and complex, like the street-corner dog. The foundry has a small museum that shows quality work it has done over the years. Near Dine's hearts and a Butterfield cast-bronze horse that looks like it is built of driftwood rests another example of Rude's explorations. The base is a cabinet Rude built then dragged through gravel so it would get nicked and look aged. It has a series of drawers and a cupboard. Atop it stands a lion. He has a foot on a wheel and another on bricks. A crane-like device rises from the lion. Its branches support a broad spectrum of elements including a lab beaker, a propeller, and a banana. A pocket watch dangles in front of the beast's face. There is a lot to take in, but you can change it if it doesn't move you. The drawers contain other objects, and the metal rods holding the items can be unscrewed and moved. Rude takes off the propeller and moves the pocket watch from the tip of the lion's nose and replaces it with a banana. Within minutes, he has rearranged and re-dressed his sculpture. Rude had been producing this style of work for some time when he stumbled upon a book titled *Devices of Wonder* that described "curiosity cabinets." These cabinets, first produced a century or so ago, employed the same principle that Rude explores—how disparate objects can be interchanged to make a new whole, something meaningful ... just as notes add up to a song. Fittingly, he calls this one widespread inquiry. WIDESPREAD INQUIRY, BRONZE, WOOD, FOUND OBJECTS, 34 X 26 X 18 "This is a way to find new meanings," he says. "You don't know what you're looking at or talking about until you take a risk and make a decision. This is a participatory thing. I want people to try it." Those who would contend that math and science happen in one side of the brain, and art and creativity in the other, may discover what Rude learned years ago: "Science is about doing experiments and finding out what happens," he says. "That's what art is, too." His work proves it.