

**HUNDREDS OF STUNNING SCULPTURES!**

THE WORLD'S FOREMOST WILDLIFE ART MAGAZINE

JULY/AUGUST 2007

# WILDLIFE ART



## SCULPTURE

**INDULGE! WITH DIMENSIONAL ART**

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Wildlife & Landscapes

**2007 SCULPTOR PROFILES**

Joshua and  
Rebecca Tobey



# Rebecca and Joshua Tobey



Photo by Michael Scott Blair

Rebecca Tobey with *Spirit Shaman* (bronze, 59 x 17 x 34"), which she says "is the life of Gene Tobey" told in sgraffito drawings, "which may be hard to see, but we've always believed that art needs to be a process of discovery."



Joshua Tobey says he called this very limber moose *The Enlightened One* (bronze, 57 x 40 x 40") because it reminds him of a wise old yogi curled up in a yoga position.

## The Legacy and the Future

BY MICHAEL SCOTT-BLAIR

A father and close buddy, a husband and true soul mate—18 months after his death at age 60, Gene Tobey is still alive and real to his uniquely styled artistic successors: his son, Joshua, and his 20-year partner in life and in their studio, wife, Rebecca. "He was my teacher, my mentor, my roughhousing partner, my drinking buddy," says Joshua, his eyes distant. "Gene and I always knew that we were one person split between two bodies, but with a single brain," says Rebecca. "He would start a sentence, I would finish it. I would put the paintbrush down when the telephone rang, and he would pick up the brush and

carry on what I was doing without hesitation."

Recently, Rebecca and Joshua came together for a joint show at the Adagio Galleries in Palm Springs, Calif., which is something they rarely do, seeking to maintain separate artistic identities. "Galleries often like to try and put us together for shows, but we resist it," says Rebecca. Adds Joshua, "I have worked very hard to create my own recognizable style, which is tough when your dad and stepmom are two such incredibly talented people." In separate interviews, the two reflected on life with and without Gene.

"I was completely inexperienced in what death is," says Rebecca. "Both my parents are still incredibly active into their 80s, and other than a grandmother, I had never come into contact with death. We knew for some time that Gene was going to die soon, but when it came—and I was with him at that moment—it is the incredible finality of it that takes away...."

When Gene and Rebecca married and started working together, they were each accomplished in the art world in their own right. But almost immediately they morphed into much more than their separate identities and skills. "My father was an incredible craftsman," says Joshua. "Rebecca brought a remarkable sense of color, and together they created brilliantly colored, extraordinarily crafted and uniquely stylized works of art," which today are among the most instantly recognizable pieces in the world of sculpture.

### *Trademark: Art Upon Art*

"If you look at my dad's early work, you see that he was heavily into black and white and dark colors, with a remarkable focus on craftsmanship and beautiful form," says Joshua. "But look at the later work, and it glows with every color in the rainbow." That beautiful form in turn becomes a canvas for more art, with paint-



*Union* (bronze, 31 x 25 x 12") by Joshua Tobey



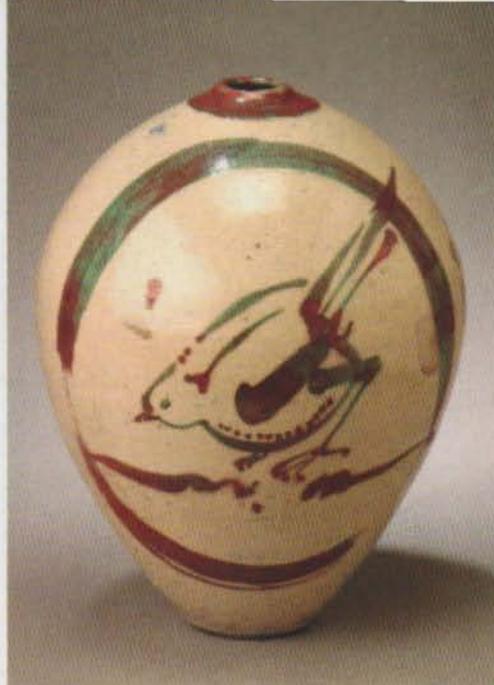
*Ursa Minor* (bronze, 14 1/2 x 9 x 24") by Gene and Rebecca Tobey

ings, sgraffito drawings and intricately carved and highly polished inserts—many are pan-cultural symbols—covering the surface. It's art upon art upon art, stories upon stories upon stories. "That is the melding of Dad and Rebecca, the result of two incredible minds revolving lovingly around one another.

"It wasn't easy in the beginning," recalls Joshua. "At one time Dad did some teaching to make ends meet, and at another, he was thinking of selling vacuum cleaners on the side for extra income. When they married and merged the families into five kids and five dogs, there were many days in those first two years when we lived on oatmeal, beans, popcorn and peanut butter. But it is a remarkable testament to their skill and their work that in a few short years, all of us were in private schools and

going to college. I vividly remember the first hint of the success that was to come when they came home from a show one time and gave \$20 to each of us five kids to go out and spend."

They came from totally different backgrounds. Rebecca's parents were both at the University of Michigan. Rebecca, now 59, was born in Ann Arbor, but when her father finished his residency at medical school, he worked at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. She grew up in Tennessee, but was sent to a boarding school in Massachusetts, and to New York for college and graduate school. "At the time, I felt I got dragged through every imaginable museum and art gallery, but when I look back I see that they gave me the incredible gift of immersion



A man with many artistic talents, Gene Tobey was also recognized for his raku pots, such as this untitled vase decorated with a bird (ceramic, 13 x 8 x 8").

in quality arts.

"Sometimes it is amazing the influence school teachers have on us. My high school teacher said I did not have the talent to be an artist, so I majored in theater with an emphasis on stagecraft and scene design at Adelphi University on Long Island, N.Y.," says Rebecca. "I worked for a couple of years, got married, had two kids, got divorced and became the director of El Prado Gallery in Santa Fe, N.M."

## The Guru of Raku

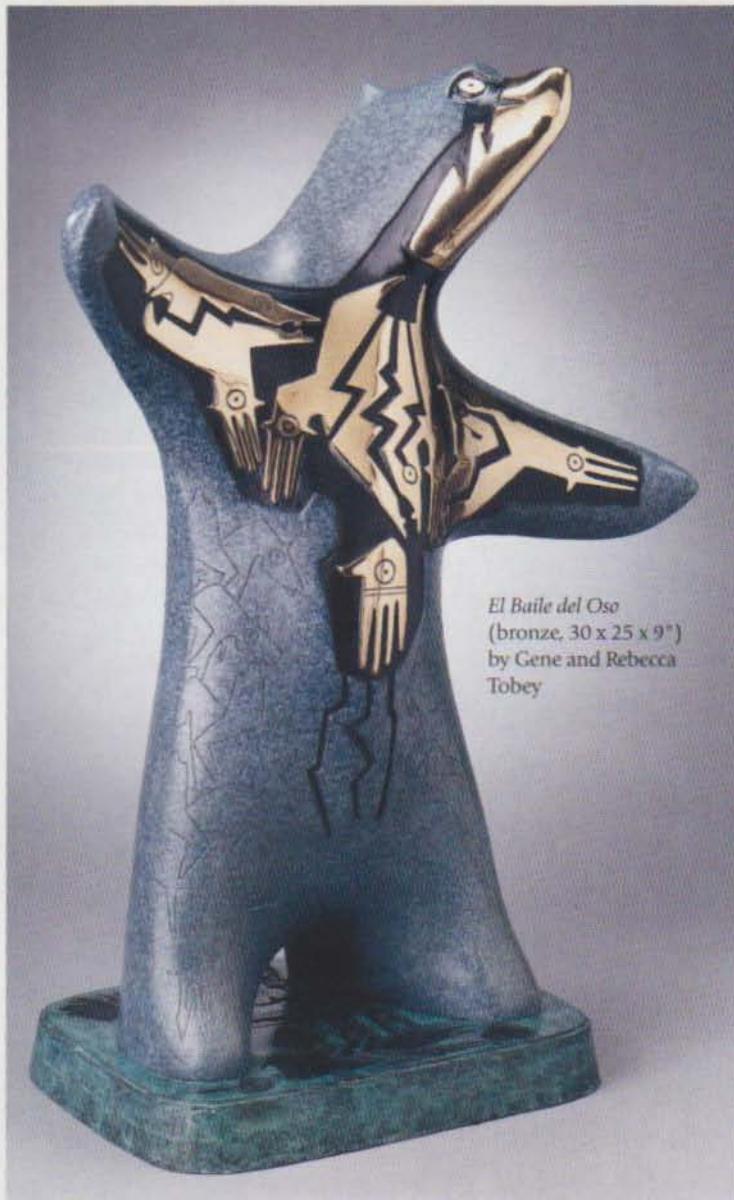
"There I fell in love with the gorgeous raku pots by someone called Gene Tobey, who I had never heard of. (Gene was known far and wide as the guru of raku.) I just had to buy one, but it was \$75 and I had to put it on layaway because I wasn't making much money. I later learned that the guy who ran the parking

lot next to the gallery made more each week than I did—so much for a bachelor's and a master's degree. Not only did I buy one of his pots, but I found them very easy to sell and I was moving five or six each week. Finally, Gene, who had moved from Oregon to Santa Fe—determined to be a full-time artist—decided to visit this woman who was selling so much of his work. I had never spoken with him at all and when he walked through the door, I had no idea who he was. Well, it may sound trite, but in truth, the rest is history," she says, glancing at the floor.

When they married, Gene, the son of a Utah coal miner and graduate of Utah State University, was doing four different kinds of art—jewelry, pottery, painting and sculpture. Rebecca worked to combine them as much as possible in order to feed the family, adding her own painting and color. "He began doing ceramic sculpture that evolved from being just the animal shapes, like a bison or a bear, to being brightly colored, three-dimensional works on which I did paintings. Nobody has reproduced that," says Rebecca. "But unfortunately, all the years of working with ceramics damaged his lungs, and the treatments ultimately led to leukemia, which killed him."

They moved to a 500-acre ranch in Texas, and later, down to the Gulf Coast, where they loved to fish. Gene was diagnosed with lung disease in 1993, and by 2003, it had advanced to pre-leukemia and he was given less than three good years. "We spent that time living his dream," says Rebecca. They went to Alaska for three weeks, spending part of the time in an isolated cabin with no electricity, and at a lodge, where huge flocks of eagles would come in to feed on salmon carcasses left on the beach. And they went to New Zealand, where he fulfilled a dream of hunting and shooting a red stag.

"Gene, whose great grandmother was Cherokee, fell in love with and felt an acute kinship with New Zealand's Maori people, who gave him a piece of jade that he had to



*El Baile del Oso*  
(bronze, 30 x 25 x 9")  
by Gene and Rebecca  
Tobey



*Sentinel* (bronze, 5½ x 36 x 6") by Joshua Tobey

take to water and bless," Rebecca says. "He took it straight to the river and said a prayer over it. I still wear it sometimes as a pendant. It was there that he asked me what I would do if something happened to him, and I said I would move back to Santa Fe. We moved back one month before he died."

### *Joshua Develops Own Style*

For Joshua, 29, the challenge was to develop his own persona despite the overarching shadow of Gene and Rebecca. "I was never pushed into art; in fact, I was going to college to become a professional fly-fishing guide and outfitter and a ski instructor," he says, which is why he selected Western State College in Gunnison, Colo., right in the middle of prime fly-fishing country. But an art class was part of his core curriculum, and he enjoyed it so much that he earned a bachelor's degree in fine arts. "College was a wonderful time, and I thanked Dad and Rebecca repeatedly for making it happen," says Joshua. "But as far as art was concerned,

*Yukon* (bronze, 10 x 12 x 4½") by Joshua Tobey



*Shadow* (bronze, 10 x 8 x 2½") by Joshua Tobey

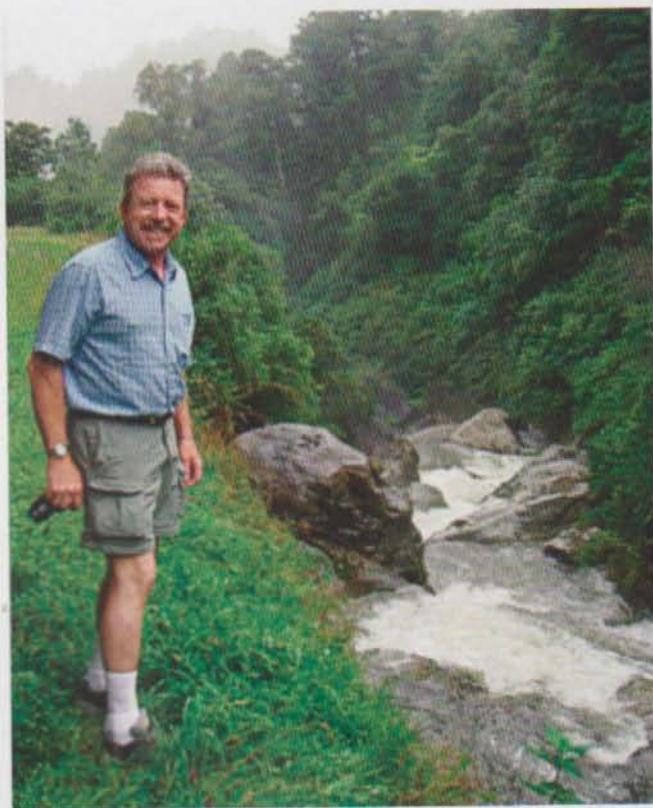


*Charger* (bronze, 10 x 8 x 2½") by Joshua Tobey

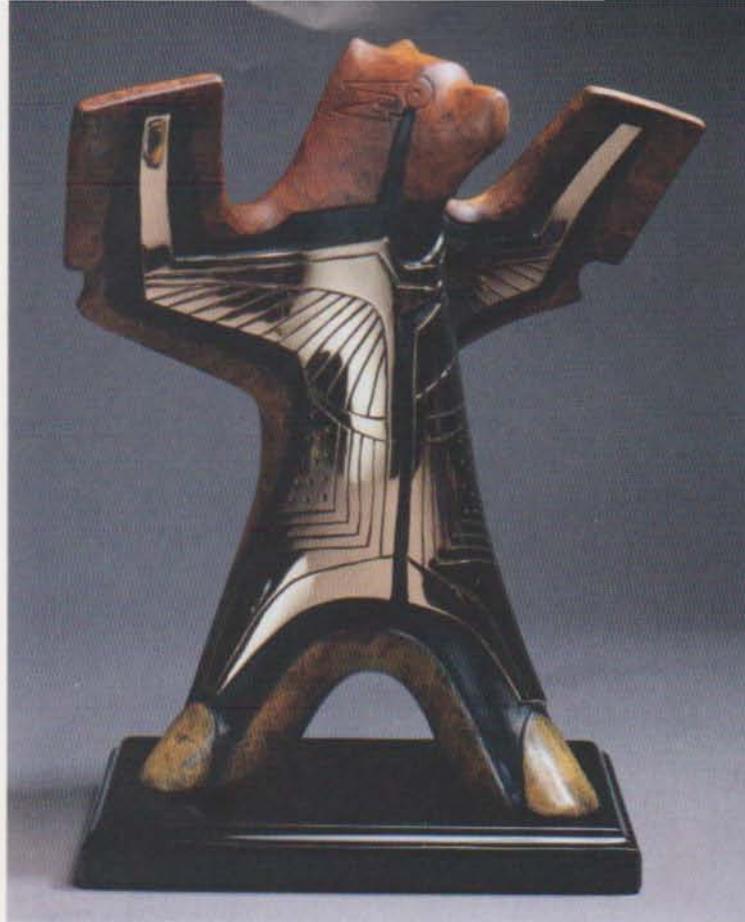


## Gliding Alaskan Eagle

*Reflection* (bronze, 10½ x 16 x 8½") was inspired by a fishing trip to Alaska that Gene and Rebecca Tobey took in 2004, where they spent a week at a lodge on Admiralty Island. The area was so isolated that power was supplied by a generator, which was switched off every evening at 10. "One evening after dinner, Gene and I borrowed a dinghy and rowed to the back of a cove where we took turns fly-fishing for salmon," Rebecca says. "The water was as still and flat as glass, and the forest lining the shore was dark and quiet. Yet as we fished, eagles and ravens flew toward the lodge across the water from us to feed on the fish carcasses that the captains provided from our day's catch. We watched the eagles gliding toward the shoreline, their images in the water a mirror image of the birds in the air. *Reflection* is the story of those eagles."



Seeking to fulfill a dream, Gene and Rebecca Tobey went to New Zealand in the spring of 2005 so that Gene could hunt a red stag. Here, he walks along a river on the country's North Island.



*Eagle Shaman* (bronze, 13½ x 13½ x 7½") by Gene and Rebecca Tobey

I think my professors were more confused about the subject matter than I was."

He graduated in 2000, "and I started looking at graduate schools, though I was not enthusiastic about it," he says. "After all, what do you do with a master's degree—maybe talk a little more knowledgeably about art history? It was clear I was going to be an artist and I realized that I had the best art department on the planet right there at home," Joshua recalls. "By now we knew Dad was sick, and I had to get back and learn everything I could. Immediately, I was immersed in things that were never mentioned in college; in fact, I had to forget virtually everything that college had taught. Both



*Song of the Buffalo* (bronze, 13½ x 15 x 15") is an example of Gene and Rebecca's transformation series, where a man morphs into the form of an animal. "It shows the close relationship between man and the animal world," Rebecca says, "and in primitive cultures, the people believed that the shaman could become an animal. Also, the shaman called the animals to provide food for the tribe, which was the role of the animals."



*Tribute* (bronze, 29 x 9½ x 2") is part of a series of eagle wall sculptures by Joshua Tobey that are dedicated to his father. A 6-foot-tall version of *Tribute*, called *Legacy*, has just been cast.



Gene and Rebecca's typical style can also be seen in their jewelry, which is offered in both silver and gold, often inlaid with turquoise, coral, jet, lapis or opal.

parents were incredibly patient, and all their guidance was laced with love."

There were, however, some occasional frustrations, says Joshua. "I might say, 'I think I'll do a horse,' and Dad would say, 'I've been thinking of that, too.' The difference was that the next day, in his studio, there was a horse. In my studio, there were a few funky wires and lumps of clay. But one of the great strengths they passed on to me was the power to believe in my ideas. I see too many young artists today who have good ideas but don't believe in themselves enough to carry their ideas through. Dad and Rebecca were not only great teachers and mentors, they constantly gave me great encouragement and confidence. He was the person I would rough-house and wrestle with, until he got too weak, and then we would go out and kill a few beers. Rebecca was, and still is, the person you go to when you need to work your way through a problem.

"Dad and Rebecca were so much a part of each other's life that it was impossible to have a relationship with only one of them," recalls Joshua. "Theirs was a fantastic romance and a wonderful love story. Life was an adventure for both of them. They both had a gypsy gene, and each work they created together was always a



About 75 percent of Gene and Rebecca's artistic efforts were spent on sculptures, but they also did jewelry, ceramics and paintings, such as this watercolor, *The Bachelors* (30 x 40").

finished piece and invariably beautiful. His death, at age 60, was devastating."

## Owl Is Harbinger of Death

That was Jan. 4, 2006, just one month after Gene and Rebecca had returned from Texas to Santa Fe. "As we drove into the driveway of the new home, a huge owl lifted off and flew away. In aboriginal lore, the owl is the harbinger of death, though we already knew he was close to death," says Rebecca. Gene sculpted the owl. "It's about 2 feet tall and still needs some work, but I have not been able to bring myself to complete it yet."

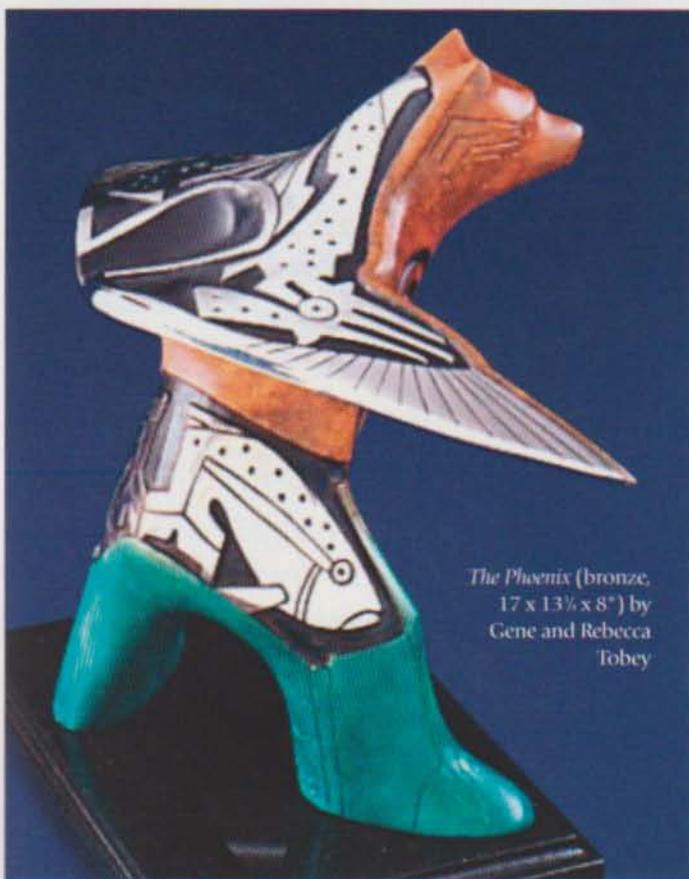


*Merlin* (bronze, 18 1/2 x 28 x 17") by Gene and Rebecca Tobey

Photo by Michael Scott Blair



*White Eagle*  
(bronze,  
13½ x 13½ x 7½")  
by Gene and  
Rebecca Tobey



*The Phoenix* (bronze,  
17 x 13½ x 8")  
by Gene and Rebecca  
Tobey

She also intends to continue a transformation series he started—the legs of a man, merging into the head of an eagle with outstretched wings, and there are deer dancers and buffalo dancers. "I would like to do more of these people-to-animals and animals-to-people pieces." However, she says that all future pieces by her will carry the names of both Gene and Rebecca Tobey. "We never discussed burial or cremation and all those things, until three weeks before he died. He said the only thing he would like to happen is for there to be scholarships in his name to help young artists. I have done that and these will continue. Apart from that, we had a big noisy party at the house with lots of beer—he would have liked that."

Joshua, who has done all of Gene's monumentals since 2001, wants to make that a tradition with which he will always be associated. "I know his mind, upside down and inside out. He always said that sculpture is problem solving, and I love to work on problems associated with his work." In addition to his own sculpture, Joshua supervises the foundry work for all Tobey pieces at a foundry four hours from his home in Corpus Christi, Texas.

All the Gene and Rebecca pieces have a story, which will be included in an upcoming book by Rebecca, *Partners in Art*, to be released in December. One such piece, an eagle called *Spirit Shaman*, "is the life of Gene Tobey," says Rebecca. "There is a man, in sgraffito drawings, who looks like an Indian, but it is Gene. One hand is by his side, the other is reaching toward the sun, which is on the eagle's upper wing. When people die, they talk of going toward the light; that is the sun. Coming out of the middle of his body are five stylized buffalo—symbolizing our five kids. (It was an early buffalo that Gene considered to be a piece that marked the beginning of our collaborative work.) Around where the man's feet would be, there is a whole crowd of people who his life has touched. Across the face of the sun there is a man being carried into flight by an eagle. There is a thing that looks like a bug with bulging eyes on many pieces. On the eagle there are two—one is flying away and one is on the ground.

"That's me." 

Images courtesy of the artists unless otherwise noted.

Before his death in early 2004, Gene Tobey told Rebecca that he would like to have some scholarships set up in his name "to help other artists explore their potential and develop their skills." Thus, she created The Gene Tobey Memorial Art Scholarship Fund, and so far, three ongoing scholarships have been set up: at Mason High School, Mason, Texas; at Joshua's alma mater, Western State College, Gunnison, Colo., and at Gene's junior college alma mater, the College of Eastern Utah, Price, Utah. Contributions are most welcome at Mason National Bank, P.O. Box 1789, Mason, Texas 76856.