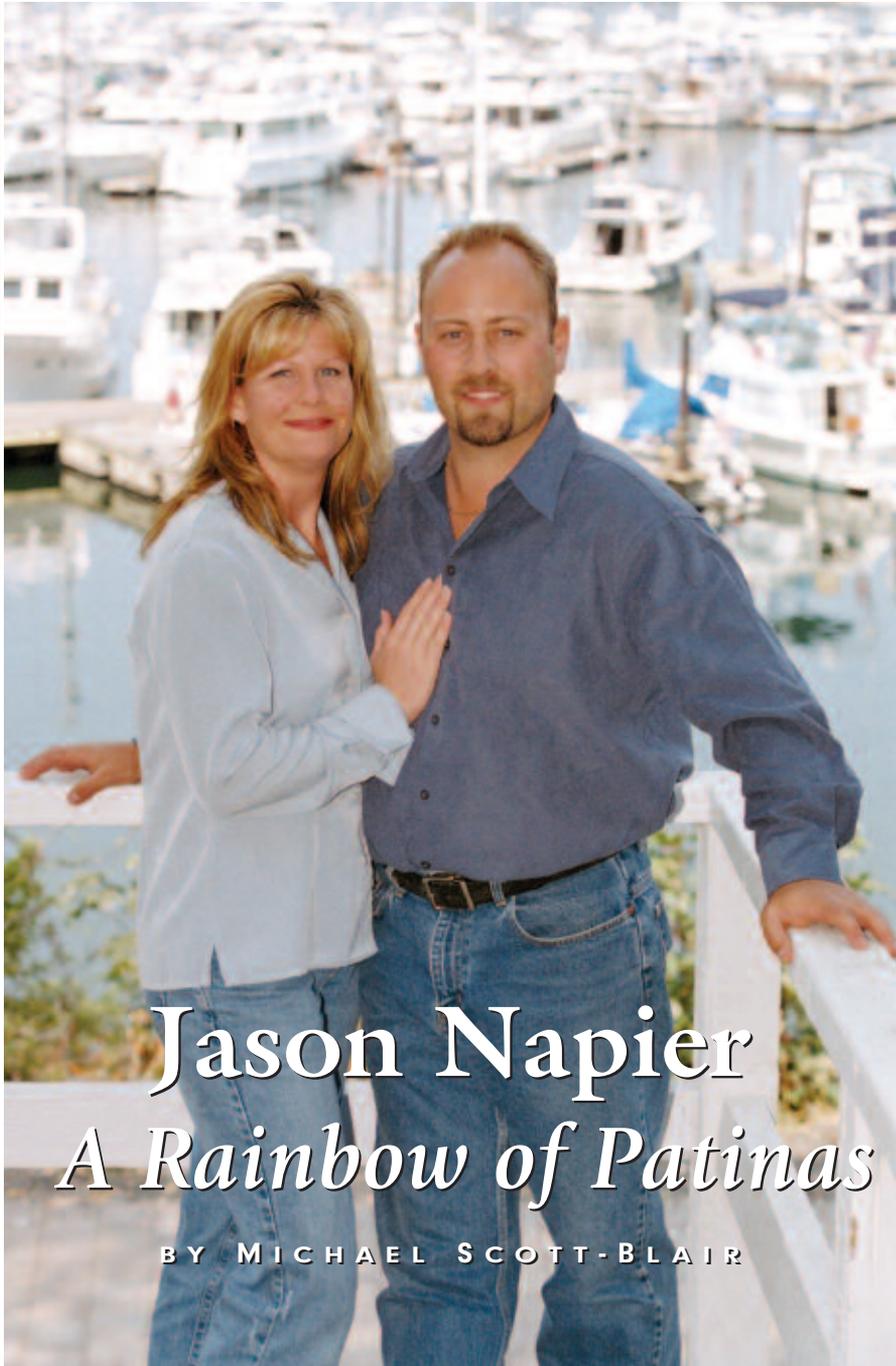


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Jason Napier

A Rainbow of Patinas

BY MICHAEL SCOTT-BLAIR

Jason and Danielle Napier pause to enjoy the Roche Harbor Marina on Washington's San Juan Islands, near their new home.

"One day I told him to get off his butt and find a job," says Danielle Napier, smiling as she slowly shakes her head. "But I never dreamed it would result in this." Danielle was polishing a magnificent bronze statue of two salmon, each gleaming with vibrant crimson and green patinas, two of many colors for which her husband, Jason, is becoming widely, and justly, respected.

Around her, eagles, cougars, foxes, dolphins, pelicans and a family of quail were on display, some of them highlighting a rich blue patina, which has become a trademark for Jason. Success is now finding its way to the Napier's door, but in the inimitable words of newscaster Paul Harvey, now we can tell the REST of the story—and it's quite a story.

be a contractor. I enjoyed it. It is something where you can go to work each day and at the end of the day, see that you have accomplished something. I like that. And without the strange circumstances that followed, that would have been my life—I would have been a contractor."

An Eye for Business

But Danielle had ideas of her own. "I wanted to be in business, so I went back to Oregon to take some college business courses." Jason followed. "He dabbled in a few courses, but nothing serious," says Danielle. "Actually, I think he was taking the courses just to be around me all



Poetic Gestures, bronze with patina,
36 x 12 x 10"

Pacific Northwest natives Jason, 32, and Danielle, 33, were high school sweethearts. "I met Jason when he was 16 years old. He had just gotten his driver's license and wanted to take me for a spin. He almost wrecked the car right then. In fact, his driving was so erratic that the cops pulled us over. But they just gave us a talking to and let us go with a warning. He's not erratic any more," she explained at a recent show.

They grew up in the Coos Bay area of Oregon, graduated from high school together, and followed Jason's father, a building contractor, up to Washington State and around the San Juan Islands. "There is no doubt," says Jason, "that I would have gone on to

Mother's Pride, bronze with patina, 8 x 4 x 4', one of two Napier bronzes that mark the entrance to the Cougar Mountain Zoo in Issaquah, Wash.



Jason shapes the clay model for *Mother's Pride*.



day," she says. Jason makes no bones about it. "That is the only reason I was on the campus. I loved being around her. Still do," he adds.

After college, Danielle went looking for work. "I answered an ad by a beginning artist who had a gallery and office over a foundry. He was trying to balance his time between the office and the foundry and not finding it easy. I took over the office side so he could focus on the foundry," recalls Danielle. Today, that beginning artist is internationally acclaimed sculptor Rip Caswell of Troutdale, Ore. However, Danielle's new job left Jason at loose ends, and it was at that time Danielle told him to get off his butt and find a job.

"I wasn't going to support him," she says.

Jason didn't know what to do. "I'd gone the Dairy Queen route, and worked at the lumberyard, but that wasn't going to cut it," he recalls. So he tried a new kind of work, applying for and getting an entry-level job. Where? At the foundry immediately below Danielle's office. "It meant that we could have lunch together and meet after work," he admits, with a sheepish grin.

But a transformation was about to take place.

A Natural in the Foundry

"It was absolutely incredible," recalls Danielle. "In six months he had gone from sweeping the floors of the foundry to doing the patina work for many of the local sculptors. He was an absolute natural. They would ask for him to work on their pieces. The challenges and the process fascinated him, and he loved the work. All the time he was learning from the local artists, and they were encouraging him and giving him tips. He soaked it up like a sponge, and one day he picked up some clay and fashioned a little duck.

"He turned it into a sculpture and I persuaded Rip to put it on display upstairs in the gallery to see what would happen. At \$395 it sold immediately, along with a limited edition of 21—Jason was 21 years old



Cycle of Life, bronze with patina, 20 x 41 x 9", salmon and roe

Close-up of the salmon heads in *Cycle of Life*, highlighting Napier's red and green patinas.



Eagle Dance, bronze with patina, 30 x 25 x 14"



at the time. It paid the rent, bought our books and all kinds of things. It was fantastic," Danielle recalls.

Jason is still amazed at the turnaround in his life. "Before the foundry, I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do. Neither of us, nor either of our families, have any background in art, and it was something to which I never gave a thought. As I said, the furthest I could see was

building houses. I liked the idea

of starting out with a bare piece of dirt and seeing it gradually change into a beautiful home

for someone—

it involved working

with your hands

and using your

mind. When I think

back, it must have

been that combina-

tion of work with

the mind and hand that

carried over into sculpt-

ing. It was during that time

around the foundry and the

gallery that Danielle and I fell more

and more in love, not only with each

other, but also with the whole idea of a life in art."

At Home on San Juan Island

The Napiers have now been in the art business full time for 11 years. They owned a gallery for 10 years in Friday Harbor on Washington State's San Juan Island, but have since bought 10 acres of land in Roche Harbor, at the other end of the island, and are landscaping it with their home, their own gallery and a 1,600-square-foot studio.

"It seems to make more sense to have our own gallery and go to the shows, rather than have pieces sitting around for months on end in somebody else's gallery," says Jason. "We talk a lot about what we would like our lives to be like in five or 10 years, but our first goal is to get our property developed into a place where our friends and clients can come to and feel very much at home."

Fortunately, the area where they live is surrounded by the kind of wildlife they love to create and market. Pointing to two bronze eagles with their talons locked together, the Napiers say they have often watched that *Eagle Dance* from their own property as the birds spiral downwards, sometimes crashing into the ground. Among all the animals, Danielle does not have any particular preferences, but birds are Jason's favorites. "Every bird is so unique," he says. "Each has a different texture, a different length, and it is a huge challenge to create them the way that God created them."

Does Jason feel that he has moved beyond being considered an 'up and coming' artist? Does he consider that an



First Breath, bronze with patina, 42 x 21 x 13"

insult or a put-down?

"Most certainly not," he shoots back. "I hope that I am always up and coming in some way. It means that I am growing. After all, what's the alternative—considering yourself as having arrived? When you feel you have arrived, it means you're not growing. And when you're not growing, you are slowly dying," he says.

A Lengthy Process

For each piece, Jason uses either clay or wax for the original. A silicone rubber mold is then formed around the original. Once the wax has been pulled from this mold, cleaned and gated, a ceramic shell is then formed. Having de-waxed the shell at 600 degrees, bronze is then poured into the shell at 2,100 degrees. When cooled, the ceramic shell is destroyed; the bronze is de-gated and sandblasted for tooling. Finally, the bronze is prepared for the patina stage using chemicals and heat.

For Jason, the time he spent working in the foundry has

been invaluable to him as a sculptor. "Knowing what goes on in the foundry means that I can form the piece in a way that offers the best possible outcome in the foundry," he says. Danielle agrees. "If you understand the foundry process and can speak their language, the operation will go much smoother. I would encourage any sculptor who has the talent to spend some serious time in learning and understanding the foundry process. If talent is one-half of successful sculpting, foundry knowledge is probably the other half," she says.

"We feel very blessed and fortunate right now," says Jason. "The artwork is selling well and we can start focusing on taking a little more control of our quality of life. We don't want to make a million dollars; we just want to be able to sit back and maybe push the envelope a little more—try some new things. For instance, I need to take drawing lessons; I am not very good at drawing. Painting might be fun, especially abstract painting where I could play with colors; ceramics would be a blast, maybe carving in stone. But I feel that most of my life will be dedicated to bronze."

"You know," adds Danielle, "when you see how much talent was released just by sweeping the floor in a foundry, you begin to wonder what other talents might be lurking in there?"

A 'Family' of Work

Looking into the distance she says, "One of the wonderful things about being in the art business is that clients become just like members of the family. They come back to see us time and time again; they are interested in our lives and how we are doing and we are able to take an interest in their lives, too."

As for personal family, like many artists who have to be



Dragonfly Delight, bronze with patina, 42 x 12 x 10"

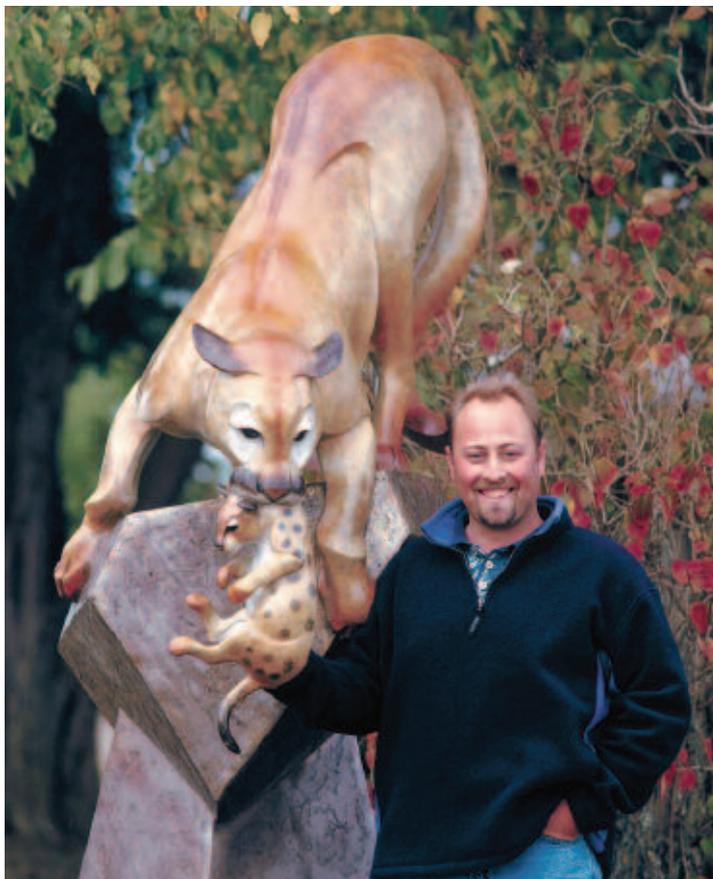
on the road traveling the show circuit, they have to put the idea of children on the back burner for a while.

"I would like to put together a body of work that means I don't feel that I have to get up at 6 a.m. to do some foundry work or work on patinas," says Jason. "At that point we might be able to take a little more time to ourselves and focus on children and give them the time they deserve."

"But right now, these are our children," says Danielle, sweeping her arms to embrace all the sculptures in their show booth. "We bring them into the world, we help them become full grown, they leave home, we stay in touch with them, and we have learned from people who own several of our pieces, that they get along very well together. That makes us proud as parents." 

Images courtesy of the artist.

Jason and *Precious Cargo*, bronze with patina, 8 x 3 x 4', a companion piece at the entrance to Cougar Mountain Zoo in Issaquah, Wash.



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