ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK FOUNDATION

BUGLE

ELK COUNTRY and the HUNT

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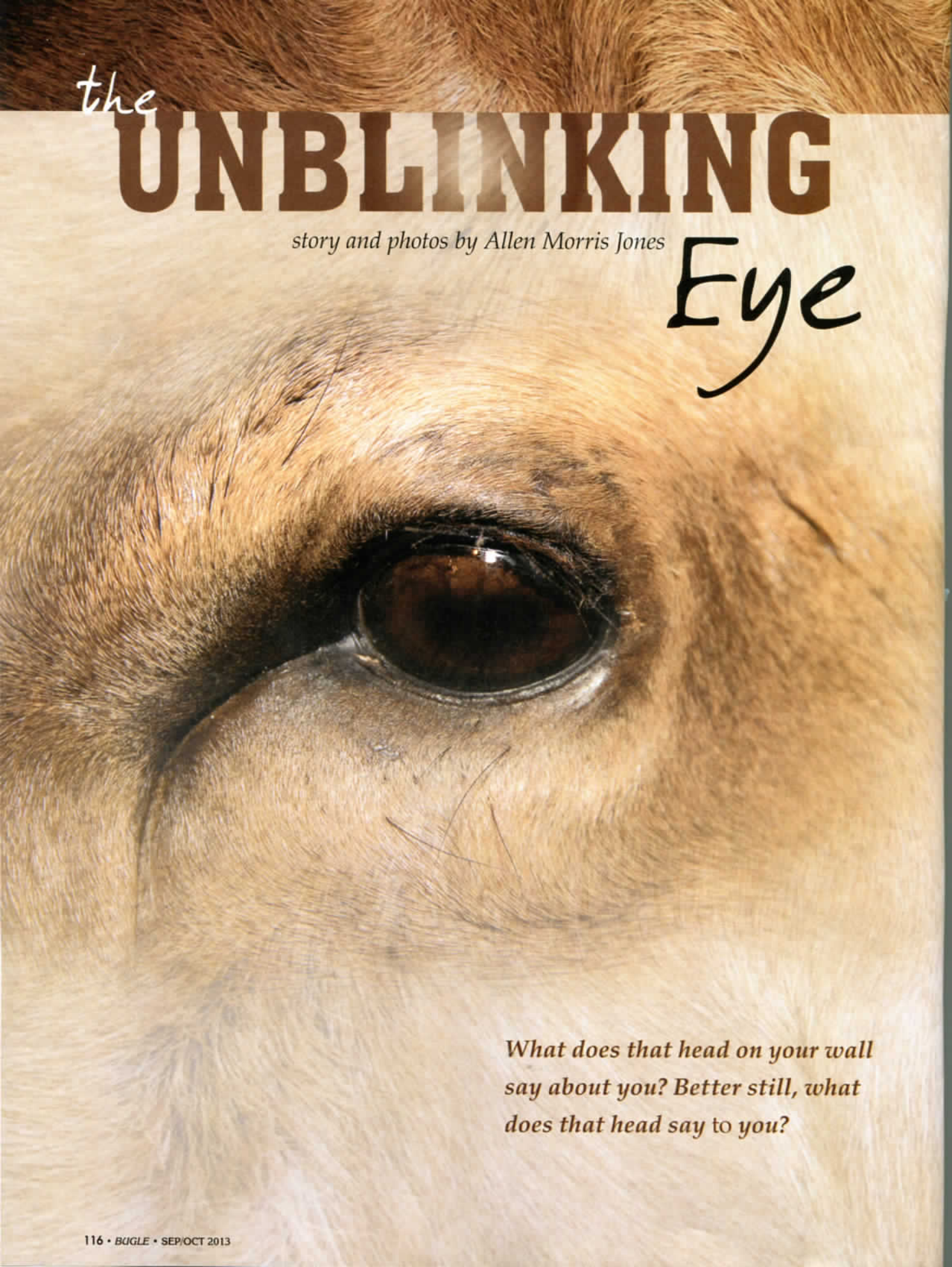
HUNTING IS CONSERVATION

the UNBLINKING Eye

story and photos by Allen Morris Jones



What does that head on your wall say about you? Better still, what does that head say to you?

Growing up, I sat on a shop stool and watched my father build a wildlife museum. This was not quite 30 years ago, outside of Livingston, Montana, with Yellowstone Park 50 miles to the south. "Tourist traffic!" we thought.

The museum was housed in the second story of a warehouse-sized metal building. Difficult to heat in the winter, impossible to cool in the summer. Our marquee exhibit was a 30-foot buffalo-jump wherein, ceiling to basement, three life-sized bison fell forever off a cliff. On the second floor we had Alaskan bull moose fighting head-to-head through alders. We had mountain goats peering down and elk bugling at each other across an aisle. There were all four species of North American sheep, and antelope running with tongues extended; whitetails on alert and mule deer with threads of grass hanging from their mouths. Every species had its own diorama, à la Carl Akeley: painted backgrounds and lacquered habitat.

Four dollars would get you in the door. And while most customers seemed to dig it, there were always a few who felt offended, or who pretended offense, and came out of the museum to give us an earful of umbrage. It astonished me then, and surprises me still, that anyone could have looked at Dad's taxidermy and failed to see the art of it. Or more to the point, failed to see the motive behind it, which, as with all art forms, was inherently generous: *Here is a part of myself that I'd like to share with you.* By and large, the disgruntled tended to be more urbane but less grounded, wealthier but less aware.

But even for the rest of us—us, the sportsmen with antlers over the fireplace—how often do we consider the larger meaning of our trophies? It's a form of sculpture, yes, but it's a form that relies upon once-living animals for materials. Which is a big deal. We all like to tell stories about our mounts—indeed, it's one of their first virtues; how they encourage us toward a narrative—but rarely do we stop to consider what the mount says about us. That whitetail head collecting cobwebs over your easy chair? Turns out, it's the tip of the iceberg. It's an artifact layered in subtext, a memorial perched on a symbol balanced on a boast. Take a chemically treated skin and drape it over a fiberglass form, add some glass eyes and ear

The typical wall mount (or, in this case, a pedestal mount) starts with a polyurethane foam manikin, or form. The first step is to fix the antlers to the form with bolts through the skull plate. The muscle mass above the skull is reproduced with papier-mâché.

A surgeon's scalpel with replaceable blades helps with the detail work. A skinning bench with a narrow board helps expose the necessary portion of the hide.

liners, and you have an animal to which it's possible to respond sympathetically. Consider: Glancing at a mounted head, you always look first into its eyes.

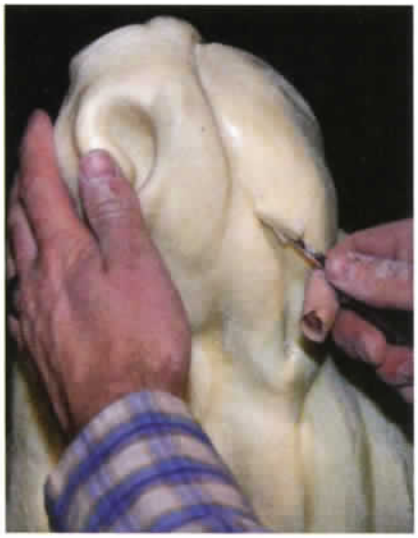
We live with our heads, but we don't think about them. At least, not as often as we should.

Richard Bradberry's taxidermy studio, Wildlife Artistry, is based in Livingston. Like most shops of this sort, it has cement floors and fleshing boards, utility drawers full of scalpel blades and dental picks, hot glue guns and wire brushes, stacks of antlers dangling tags. A stream of hunters and friends dropping by to heft a new set of antlers, give an appreciative whistle, talk about how the elk hunting's not what it used to be. For my money, a good taxidermy studio always manages to combine the best aspects of a corner barber shop and local bar, maybe a little art gallery thrown in for good measure.

A Montana native and former welder, Bradberry apprenticed for nine years with Wildlife Artistry, then owned by Dan Quillen, before buying the business himself. Currently producing as many as 300 mounts a year, he doesn't hurry through his work, but he doesn't linger, either. "A piece like this," he said, scooping up glue with a bare hand, slathering it over the pedestal form of a bull elk, "will take about eight to 10 hours, start to finish." Those eight to 10 hours are spread out across several sessions and at least 10 days. You prep the hide, bolt antlers to the form, build a papier-mâché base around the skull plate. Cut into the form to give a little extra room for the lips, nostrils, eyes. Drape the skin, tuck the lips, punch pins here and there, stitch the skin up the back. Wait for it all to dry then do the detail work around the eyes and nose. Sounds simple enough. But then there are the 10,000 incidental decisions that have to be made along the way—the spacing of stitches, the amount of glue, the density of the paint. It needs the kind of expertise that can only arise from repetition. To do it well, to do it artfully, needs a lifetime's worth of dedication.

When it's *not* done well, you can see it instantly. The animals are simply wrong. Alone among art forms, the success of a given piece of taxidermy lies in the artist's ability to more precisely approach reality. There's little room in taxidermy for interpretation. No cubism or fauvism, impressionism or Dadaism. No isms at all. As an art form, taxidermy can thus creatively expand in only one direction: toward the more realistic. As a result, after a century and more of development, what modern taxidermists can now accomplish verges on the astonishing. Browsing the aisles of a taxidermy competition or maybe a Safari Club convention, standing before a life-sized bull elephant with ears flared or a mule deer buck rubbing its face against a branch, eyes half closed in pleasure … All it should take to make these animals blink and

Once an appropriate amount of bondo is deposited into the ear, the skin is smoothed out into a lifelike shape.



The sophistication of taxidermy supplies has increased exponentially in the last 10 or 15 years, but even the finest forms typically need some further prep work. Before setting the eyes or draping the skin, Richard Bradberry scores the eye socket and cuts deeper indentations into the nose and mouth.

A slow-drying glue, or hide paste, holds the skin tight to the form. Bradberry slathers it on in handfuls scooped up from a 5-gallon bucket.

breathe is a jolt of electricity, or maybe the right kind of word, a *shazam* or *abracadabra*. I spent two days with Rich Bradberry, watching him build his bull elk, and I still can't tell you the moment when his elk made that magical transition. Sometime after the eyes were affixed to the form but before the pins were pushed into the mouth, there was an instant wherein the creation became a creature. And I have no idea just how it happened, or when.

Shops like Rich's stand as part of a larger history. American incarnations of an Old World tradition. In Greek, *taxis* means arrangement and *derma* means skin, and the practice has been around, in one form or another, for hundreds of years. Indeed, depending on your definitions, maybe thousands. (Think of the mummified Salukis curled up next to their pharaohs.) But in its modern form, it can be traced back to the early 1500s when, according to Melissa Milgrom in her book, *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy*, a Dutch nobleman's prized cassowaries were skinned and treated by chemists. They were "crudely mounted using wires, and affixed … to a perch." Arsenical soap, the first successful hide preservative, was invented in France in the mid-1700s. By the early 1800s, taxidermy had evolved to the point where animals could literally be stuffed—with straw, rags, paper. The results, more often than not, were grotesque parodies of life rather than reflections of it. But the notion that preserved skins could be used without fear of rot and disintegration made further innovations possible. It wasn't long before taxidermists like William T. Hornaday (of the Smithsonian) and Carl Akeley (from the American Museum of Natural History) were using manikins—effectively, sculptures under the skin—and creating, almost overnight, an entirely new art form.

To build a good mount requires knowledge of the animal. It requires observation and dissection, the curiosity of a naturalist and the eye of a photographer. It requires a certain kind of emotional investment. It's no coincidence that our best taxidermists have also been some of our greatest hunters and conservationists, working to preserve the habitats of the creatures they harvest. Hornaday was instrumental in saving American bison, and Akeley's work in Africa was almost singularly responsible for the long-term conservation of mountain gorillas. Taxidermy, when it's done well, is evidence of a love for the animals. To save a thing, paradoxically, you must first dispatch it.

These days, of course, taxidermy is most often used for trophy preservation and presentation. And as opposed to the curators, the impulse for a hunter is, I believe, an extension of the motivation behind the hunt itself. We want to both acquire an animal and be acquired by it. Putting a trophy on the wall is partly a brag—no denying it—but it's also meant to be a

Before tucking the lips into the form, before pinning the eyes or fixing the ears, the loose skin hangs off the form in stark contrast to the tidy, finished product.

An airbrush makes for a smooth, even application of paint over the nose, around the eyes, and under the chin. Almost as much time is spent on the small details and finish work as in the rest of the mount.

For a practiced commercial taxidermist, a typical head mount will take about eight to ten total hours to complete, with a week's worth of drying in the middle.

GIVING THANKS—Allen Jones packing out the head of the magnificent ram he killed in western Montana. The ram now hangs above his front door, bringing memories of a magical day with his father in equal measures of melancholy and gratitude.

kind of trigger, a reminder of past experience. You can glance up in the middle of dinner and give yourself a brief moment. A few seconds of exhilaration and regret, melancholy and gratitude and a little self-indulgent pride that you, *you*, were the one who took this animal. With the pride, of course, also comes a passing shadow of shame. Yes, I did this thing. For better or worse, to hunt you have to kill, and this is the result. Maybe, then, taxidermy is also an act of penance. An extraordinary life has been lost, and this is what remains. Having ended a life prematurely, taxidermy lets us extend some part of the animal long past its natural span.

Indeed, in that context, and depending on your own inclinations, the heads on your wall might also serve as a kind of elaborate *memento mori*—the equivalent of a skull under a hand in a portrait from the Baroque. Maybe that nice Missouri Breaks buck from a few years back is whispering it even now: "Remember this: You, too, will die." The most extravagant trophy rooms, through this lens, become something like the Capela dos Ossos in Portugal, the chapel of bones:

> *"Stop … for the sake of your journey,*
> *The more you pause, the further on your journey*
> *you will be."*

Enough of that. In my own home, I live with several trophies, and they are rarely reminders of my own mortality. They do, however, recall some of my favorite hunts, some of my favorite single days among the other, unremarkable thousands. After my wedding, the day my son was born, these are the highlights. First among these equals, a bighorn ram I killed in 1996 outside of Thompson Falls (one of those once-in-a-lifetime draws). It green scored 192 and change. It's shrunk since then, of course, but I haven't put a tape to it, preferring not to know. It hangs by the front door where it stares calmly down over the alarums and excursions of our living room.

Studying it now, I see for a moment how it peered at me through a cold rain, a smaller ram beside it. I remember my brief despair when, after I shot, it lunged up out of its bed and disappeared around the slope of a shale slide. (Did I miss? It felt like an easy shot, but you never really know.) And I remember Dad's excitement when he found it caught up in the wet brush and stone. "What a ram!" The feel of the cold horns under my hands, and the heavy swivel of his neck as we turned him for photos. It's somehow all there, caught up in the skin glued and sewn into place, the yellow form hidden under hair, the eyes and the horns.

Taxidermy is a number of things—a boast, a tribute, an art form—but above all else, I believe, it's a memory fixed in a place of prominence. Like all good memories, it's made up of equal parts melancholy and gratitude. I consider my ram now, and I find myself saying again, briefly and for the ten-thousandth time, simply: Thank you.

Allen Jones lives and writes in Bozeman, Montana. He's the author of, among other books, A Quiet Place of Violence: Hunting and Ethics in the Missouri River Breaks.