

STALKING SPIRITS IN STONE BY IVAN DOIG

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# WASHINGTON

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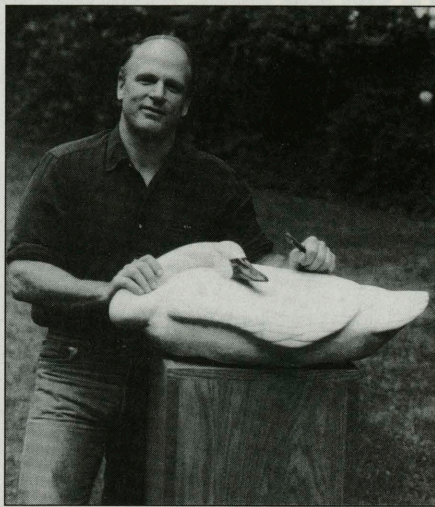
## STONE SPIRITS



Wildlife artist Tony Angell  
coaxes life from stone, and  
works magic with his  
hands.

*By Ivan Doig*

Tony Angell is the Remington or Russell of our regional art, although he may go even deeper than either," says Ivan Doig, himself one of Washington's foremost writers. If so, we have yet to elevate his name to deserved household status, but Angell is clearly on his way. Inspired by such influences as Audubon, his mother (who encouraged him) and the Indian carvers of the Pacific Northwest, Angell has created a body of work—drawings, paintings, books and sculptures—which express his vision of, and passion for, the natural world. This passion translates into nonartistic activism. Angell, who lives in Seattle and also has a studio in the San Juans, is a leader in the Washington State Chapter of The Nature Conservancy and past president of Puget Sound Alliance, a group committed to restoring the environmental quality of Puget Sound. He is also a member of the prestigious National Academy of Western Artists. In the following story, Doig writes about the artist with the admiration of a fellow craftsman who shares a love of landscapes, nature's forms and the creative process itself.—Ed.



Overleaf, an alabaster plover emerges from rugged rock to extend its wing gracefully in the spring sun. Above, Tony Angell in his Seattle studio. Below, a curious harbor seal glides through a Puget Sound kelp bed. Right, like yin and yang symbols, small serpentine flounders blend into a background of stone, camouflaged just as they are on the seafloor.



A stone's way of saying is not with words, and so the large-armed man in the midst of these dozen hunks and chunks speaks out their names for them. "Here's white alabaster. This is green serpentine. Black marble, white marble, variegated marble. Over there, that's black steatite. Gray argillite. Gray alabaster." They surround the sculptor like a playful avalanche, these melodious rocks, nestled just to within touch of him, seeming to await with patient curiosity his next pronouncement. Waiting in conspicuous squat atop the sculpting block is gray alabaster, a piece of dusk-colored stone about the size and shape and blandness of a lopsided waste basket.

"This looks to me like a great gray owl," says Tony Angell.

Messages from stone have firmed our lives for at least the last 200 centuries; in the Lascaux Cave of southern France were discovered wall paintings done by our ancestors around 18,000 BC—"long-necked reindeer, majestic bulls, lowing cows, great humped bison," as the writer Guy Davenport described Lascaux's stone-held ancient nature art, "in files and herds, flowing in long strides down some run of time through the silence of the mountain's hollow." Think too of fossils. Of arrowheads. Feudal castles, medieval cathedrals. Petrified wood. The Great Wall of China. The Grand Canyon. The stone world's eloquence of what was, what lasts, what changes, is ever with us down to our own run of time.

But when what is within stone has not quite yet made itself known—when it is still in native stone dialect, so to speak—we then need the interpreter, the sculptor. "For," explains Tony Angell, "each rock definitely has a particular spirit, a personality. One stone is stubborn, another is responsive. One is adventuresome, another is comparatively dull. The rock is telling me what it would like to be."

Really? Actually sending out signals of the intrinsic sculpted form it prefers, does he mean?

"Yes. The shape the rock already has, suggests what I ultimately will do with it. A cube or block, now—that doesn't suggest anything to me, other than a cube or a block. So I like to have the rock already shaped, headed in the right direction. To let the rock lead me, rather than me leading the rock. To let the rock take me away with it."

In more ways than one, Angell's wondrously expressive stone creatures come from his artistic feeling, for here, literally, is an artist who does his work by hand. In the earliest strokes of his hammer and chisel on a fresh rock, "My hands can give me a quick reading as to whether there's a flaw, just by the kind of feeling that comes up out of the stone when I strike it." Then all throughout the day's sculpting, Angell keeps stroking the stone with his fingers, cupping caresses to it with his palm. "Say I want to do a flow of feathers over the sculpture's back; I may look at the stone there, but I'll also spend some time feeling it, running my hand over it. And sometimes the feel will say, hey, this isn't quite right."

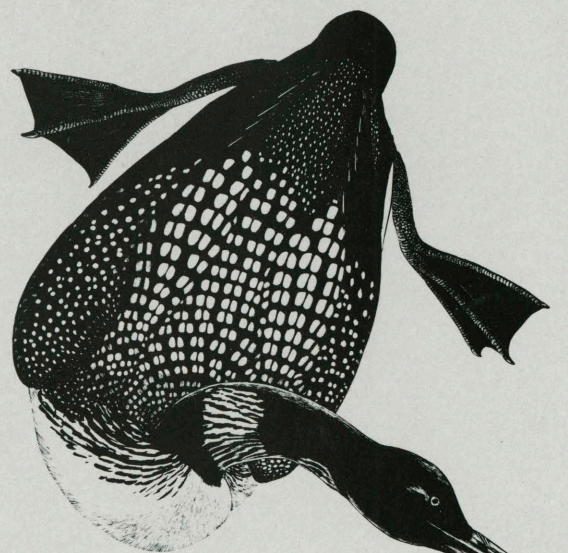
"The heavens are not opening up," says Angell, quick to disclaim a miracle in this laying on of hands, "the gods are not touching that rock." Rather, years of daily dedication to stonecraft are making themselves felt—what a poet has called the long devotion of the muscles to the bones.

This durable delicacy of the way he works into the stone is a remarkable refinement of power and dimension in the same way Angell himself is. He is what might be called a medium helping of big man: solidly muscled, thick wherever





Above, a sleek alabaster tundra swan reposes in tranquility. Below, a Washington winter resident, a common loon, prepares to dive for a herring dinner.



you look at him, but except in the arms, not as supremely huge as you might expect of someone who spends a good part of his days moving heavy rock around. He is searchingly thoughtful about life, particularly its manifestations in art and nature, but he also has a room-filling laugh and a hopeless penchant for telephoning his friends in strange accents; and when telling the tale of one sculpture or another, he is perfectly apt to begin: "To make a long story short—No, I'll make a short story long..."

He also possesses an energy level which, if they could hook him up right, would run the lighting and air-conditioning for an entire nine-week exhibition of his work. Besides sculpting, Angell writes and illustrates (thus far, five books), draws, paints with both watercolor and oil, and has recently taken up stone lithography. In addition to all that, he holds the job of supervisor for environmental education for the state of Washington, is an activist in The Nature Conservancy, and has been president and spokesman for the environmentalist group called Puget Sound Alliance.

This omnifarious approach he carries over into his stonework, keeping several different sculptures going at once. "Lighted fuses," he calls these works-in-sundry-stages-of-progress. "By having five or six things to do, there's always something I can apply myself to. I'll often start in the morning by doing some fine stuff with the chisel, maybe I'll incise the eye of this pileated woodpecker. Then after I do this for a while I'll go over and get the big chisel and hammer, and maybe go out to some fresh place and start taking rock off."

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The Lascaux Cave and its rockscape of eloquently elemental animals was discovered in 1940, Tony Angell's birth year. Maybe time too sends messages reverberating through its interstices. Angell's green, gentle crevice of childhood was California's San Fernando Valley, and as the willow-and-eucalyptus-groves-that-were became the Los Angeles-suburbs-that-are, his concern for nature was sharpened. (An athletic scholarship to the University of Washington took Angell north to Seattle in 1958; here he and his wife, Noel, and vibrant twelve-year-old daughters, Byrony and Gilia, still live, along with various wildlife mending from mishaps.) Angell believes his art constantly tries to bespeak the balance, the integrity, that nature maintains if humankind will let it:

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Now to see, with Angell's guidance when needed, how his outlook and nature and stone find their way together in his works. Let us now appraise murrelets.

"They're a favorite bird, very wonderfully structured," he says of these chubby, buoyant seabirds of Pacific coastal waters, no longer than the span of your hand. "They've got those paddlelike wings—I've always enjoyed sculpting those against the stout bodies." How he has sculpted helps to explain his divinations of the personality of stone. *Bird at Sea* is of black steatite; the stone itself, in its polished bird form and unpolished surge of wave, is the black and gray of the drama presented by this solitary swimmer of the great and restless sea. "This stout fellow," Angell calls him in due admiration. Now turn your eyes toward birds of a different color, the gray argillite *Two Murrelets*. Of warmer tone of gray, of softer stone, this pair hurtles on and down in thrilling surf-ride rather than struggling up the face of the water. "These two little guys are together, they're partners in their situation."

Striving and brave solitude, *Bird at Sea* seems to say.

Achievement and companionship, *Two Murrelets* seems to say.



A pair of stately pelagic cormorants stands at attention.



A female red-winged blackbird swoops down to attack a magpie threatening her nest. Right, black argillite suits the texture of this mantling hawk's feathery cape.

The warmth of the argillite versus the drama of the steatite, Angell believes, comes into our perception this way by courtesy of "the stone and how it handles light. At least to my eye, there's a softness to the argillite. It's as if the stone just says, 'Okay, relax, go with the flow.' "

Whatever the "flow" of any specific Tony Angell sculpture, under it is a remarkable deepness of form, an essence as if the sculpted creature is declaring *this is what it is to be* falcon, hawk, eagle, murrelet, weasel, hare...


Perhaps put it this way: The English novelist Arnold Bennett was once told by a discerning admirer that while Bennett's famous book *The Old Wives' Tale* was "it," his newer and riskier work was "itter." Similarly, Tony Angell's sculptures are more quintessential, "itter," than the actuality of the forms of the creatures they portray. This is most quickly seen in the robust size of his stone birds and animals. "A lot of my work is a little larger than what actual life is," he remarks, "but no larger than what I perceive them to be." At work here too is the expressive density of stone itself. A murrelet in life, for instance, weighs not much more than half a loaf of bread, but the steatite *Bird at Sea* registers a resounding 22-1/2 pounds, and the argillite *Two Murrelets* 20-1/2 pounds—adding a quiet but hefty substantiality, a multiplication of the little bird's beingness, to how we see Angell's concept of a murrelet.

Impressive as they are in size and weight, Tony Angell's sculptures most of all have the enhancement of risk. To look at one of his creatures is to see motion about to erupt—the pileated woodpecker tensely ready to begin his jackhammering, the kingfisher set to make lunch of its catch—and this extraordinary sense of rock-about-to-spring-to-life is perhaps Angell's most intriguing, edge-walking achievement in his work. "Putting in a sense of flexed preparedness," he simply calls it, but it is anything but simple. Once again, that long devotion of the muscles to the bones; in high school and college Angell was a shot-putter, and the contained power of shot putting, the release waiting to happen, seems still to be speaking in his musculature's memory as he sculpts.

And the sculptures that are yet to happen? What does he hope the stone will suggest next?

"I'll always do ravens. I've given myself this promise to do one raven at least a year. And more murrelets. As to ones I haven't done yet but want to..." He begins to think them aloud: "gray jet... magpie... tundra swan..." The spirit flock waiting in the stone.

"This is a good place to stop," Angell says as he lifts away the power grinder that has just granted disc eyes to the rock. "I'm excited, I'm stimulated, and now I can take that stimulation over here," turning to where a green serpentine flatfish waits to have its fins created, "and do some of this."

Behind him on the sculpting block, gray alabaster by now is not just itself, but uncannily, indubitably, intrinsically owl. 

Ivan Doig is the author of the memoir *This House of Sky*, which was nominated for a National Book Award, and the novel *English Creek*, winner of the Western Heritage Wrangler Award as best novel of 1984. He lives, writes and bird-watches in Seattle.

Stone Spirits was adapted from Ivan Doig's story in *Gilcrease Magazine of American History and Art*. Tony Angell's drawings were gleaned from two of his books: *Marine Birds and Mammals of Puget Sound* and *Blackbirds of America*. Copyright 1986 by Ivan Doig. Photographs by Greg Krogstad.



# GILCREASE

MAGAZINE OF AMERICAN HISTORY AND ART

1986  
*Rendezvous Artist:*  
Richard  
Schmid



# Stone Spirits: Tony Angell and the Art of Nature

BY IVAN DOIG

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In more ways than one, Angell's wondrously expressive stone creatures -- the Rendezvous exhibition is a proportionate sample of his subjects: some mammals, some fish, and birds by the flock -- come from his artistic feeling, for here,

literally, is an artist who does his work by hand. In the earliest strokes of his hammer and chisel on a fresh rock, "My hands can give me a quick reading as to whether there's a flaw, just by the kind of feeling that comes up out of the stone when I strike it." Then all throughout the day's sculpting, Angell keeps stroking the stone with his fingers, cupping caresses to it with his palm. "Say I want to do a flow of feathers over the sculpture's back; I may *look* at the stone there, but I'll also spend some time *feeling* it, running my hand over it. And sometimes the feel will say, hey, this isn't quite right.

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## TWO MURRELETS

6 inches high by 15 inches long by 10 inches wide  
argillite

"Along northern Puget Sound pairs of these small seabirds chase one another in synchronous flight. The pairs are so close they appear to be a single form and in turn present all sorts of possibilities for sculptural interpretation. This piece contrasts somewhat with the more lonely mood of the single murrelet depicted in "Bird at Sea". Here I've sought to emphasize the action and momentum of the two forms hurtling forward along the uneven surface of the water.

As in most pieces I've enjoyed watching this sculpture evolve. I find that it's something that changes with the time of day, the light and certainly with the point of view I take when it's approached."

Tony Angell





# YOUNG OWL

15 inches long by 17 inches high by 10 inches wide  
grey alabaster

"With tail yet to grow out and feathered horns yet to emerge, this is a fledgling bird out for a first foray and a test of wings. The soft grey/brown color of the stone is a perfect match for the plumage of a young owl."

Tony Angell



# COILED WEASEL

4 inches high by 11 inches long by 10 inches wide  
brown marble

"Along with the rabbit, we have a resident ferret who is an absolutely perfect model for much of the weasel family. He's an unbridled frolicker, with an insatiable curiosity and once he's finished a house-wide romp he'll curl up with the cat. The long-tailed weasel is white in winter and brown in summer. As its appearance changes with the season, there is a time when it appears to be colored with a bit of both the light and the dark. The marble I found was a perfect match and our live-in ferret (the weasel's first cousin) was more than a willing model. We also have wild weasels that hunt along our creek for water rats. Mink too are sometimes spotted, but they're hunting for trout. "This weasel has just come upon something interesting and perhaps caught a tantalizing scent in the breeze. He'll soon be off in pursuit."

Tony Angell

MAGPIES IN SYCAMORE  
20<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches by 13<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
watercolor

"This painting was done when I was deep in the study of the fascinating family of corvids which includes not only the yellow-billed magpies but ravens, crows and jays as well. We had been in north central California where this particular species is found and were picnicking beneath sycamores and along a dry stream bed. A pair of the inquisitive birds descended looking for a possible handout and for a moment struck a pose that was caught between a frame of sycamore branches. It was a design too good to pass up and I think this study captures part of that memory."

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LOON

7 inches high by 16 inches long by 6 inches wide  
grey argillite

"Every winter large numbers of Arctic, Common and Red Throated Loons come and winter on Puget Sound. By early spring they have their plumage of courtship and are calling plaintively in the bays. In the morning, when the sea's surface is calm and flat and the sun has yet to rise, the loon sets off to fish and watches the waning light of a star."

Tony Angell





#### SMALL FLOUNDERS

3 inches high by 10 inches long by 12 inches wide  
serpentine

"I see these fish when I dive in the rich waters of Puget Sound. Their skin often matches their preferred background which may not be at all unlike the color of this stone.

I've enjoyed interpreting these forms for (like the loon) there's a directness about them — a strong and simple image. Then too there's the border of fin with the abundance of line that embraces the smooth body.

For a fresh model I need go no further than our public market on the waterfront. I have eaten more than one of my models."

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Grey alabaster answers the bap bap of hammer on tooth chisel by flying off in flakes big as sprung padlocks. Chuff chuff chuff of a rasp atop the lopsided that is becoming the rock's peering head, and motes of alabaster float away. The sculptor searches into the stone with a carbide-tipped hacksaw blade one inch, two, three, four. With a pointed chisel, he breaks out a major chunk he has decided must go. After nearly an hour of this loud tactile dialogue, Angell kneels as if looking into the face of the stone and declares:



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"The motives of the subjects I treat are directed toward the single end of survival, and survival on reasonable levels, the fitting within the niche of a particular habitat, rather than the kind of overindulgent, indifferent kind of behavior that marks so much of our 'advanced' society. Like a lot of students in American lit, I'm touched by Thoreau: 'Simplify, simplify.' "

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# HUNTING FALCON

8 inches high by 10 inches long by 5 inches wide  
grey argillite

"There's a special moment in all living and vital life forms where their posture suggests that action is but a breath away. It's a coiled spring or a lighted fuse.

I've often watched hunting merlins and peregrine falcons twist rapidly around on their perches to follow the action of some animal. They sometimes crouch and lean far forward before they're off in a burst of wings."

Tony Angell



# THE WOOD HEWER

10 inches high by 6 inches deep by 6 inches wide  
argillite

"The Pileated Woodpecker has always amazed me. As big as a crow they can fly at hawk speed when threading their way through a thick forest. They hammer fist-sized pieces of bark and wood from the sides of trees as they dig out termites and the larvae of carpenter ants.

As a sculptor I'm fascinated with the depiction of this subject's specialized form and the interpretation of that elemental matching of its being with the surface of the tree upon which its life depends."

Tony Angell

# KINGFISHER WITH CATCH

10 inches high by 6 inches long by 6 inches wide  
grey marble

"There are few forms in nature that are quite as demonstrative as the Kingfisher. They just stand there on a twig before you and you can make a pretty good guess as to what they do for a living. There's not much subtlety to them and because of this they are very clear as to what one sculpts "about" them.

This one has just snapped up a small fish and has flown to a rock holding his catch. Including fish, or any animal caught by the subject, opens up fresh opportunities for design and contrast.

Because of the degree of hardness and relative lightness of color I have chosen to detail the sculpture in a way that I hope reinforces the overall form. The lines of wing feathers repeat the lines of the wing itself and the unruly head of feathers give additional attention to that oversized head and beak."

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different color, the grey argillite "Two Murrelets." Of warmer tone of gray, of softer stone, this pair hurtles on and down in thrilling surf-ride rather than struggling up the face of the water. "These two little guys are together, they're partners in their situation," Angell confirms.

Striving and brave solitude, "Bird at Sea" seems to say. Achievement and companionship, "Two Murrelets" seems to say.

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# RAVEN INTO FLIGHT

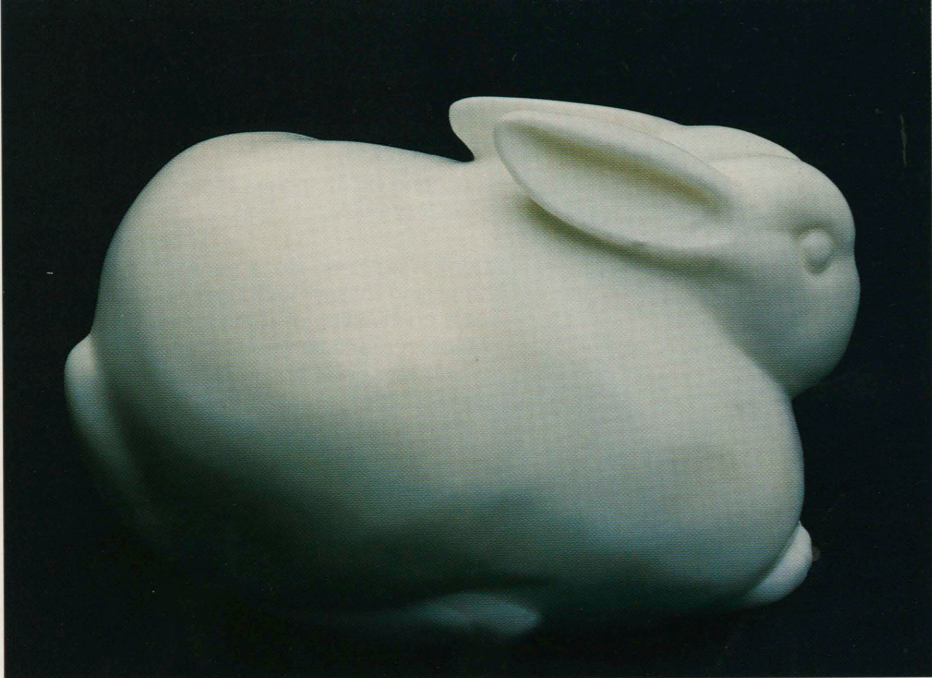
30 inches high by 28 inches long by 45 inches wide  
bronze on black granite

"This particular piece was my first bronze endeavor after having been stone carving for nearly ten years. I had been very much immersed in the research, drawing and writing for my book *Ravens, Crows, Magpies and Jays*. In some ways, I'm convinced the completion of the piece was a culmination of some incredibly intense personal moments connected with my work on the Raven. It also stands in dramatic contrast with the comparatively gentle mood of "Courting Ravens" which was done about the same time.

I can personally identify with the Raven as he launches into flight — pulling away from earthly concerns to ride the whims of the wind."

Tony Angell





SNOWSHOE

5 inches high by 10 inches long by 5 inches wide  
white marble

"For the past four years we've had a rabbit living in the house. He has his special "territory" of course, but he sometimes has the run of the house and will join us in the family room and settle in much like a family dog.

Their smooth and gentle contours are seductive to the eye and when I have a piece of stone that is already "rabbit" like in its form, the process is underway."

Tony Angell

nett was once told by a discerning admirer that while Bennett's famous book *The Old Wives' Tale* was "it," his newer and riskier work was "itter." Similarly, Tony Angell's sculptures are more quintessential, "itter," than the actuality of the forms of the creatures they portray. This is quickest seen in the robust size of his stone birds and animals. "A lot of my work is a little larger than what actual life is," he remarks, "but no larger than what I perceive them to be." At work here too is the expressive density of stone itself. A murrelet in life, for instance, weighs not much more than half a loaf of bread, but the steatite "Bird at Sea" registers a resounding 22½ pounds and the argillite "Two Murrelets" 20½ pounds -- adding a quiet but hefty substantiality, a multiplication of the little bird's beingness, into how we see Angell's concept of a murrelet.

Impressive as they are in size and weight, Tony Angell's sculptures most of all have the enhancement of risk. To look at one of his creatures is to see motion about to erupt -- the pileated woodpecker tensely ready to begin his jackhammering, the kingfisher set to make lunch of its catch -- and this extraordinary sense of rock-about-to-spring-to-life is perhaps Angell's most intriguing, edge-walking achievement in his work. "Putting in a sense of flexed preparedness," he simply calls it, but it is anything but simple. Once again, that

long devotion of the muscles to the bones; in high school and college Angell was a shotputter, and the contained power of shotputting, the release waiting to happen, seems still to be speaking in his musculature's memory as he sculpts.

And the sculptures that are yet to happen? What does he hope the stone will suggest next?

"I'll always do ravens. I've given myself this promise to do one raven at least a year. And more murrelets. As to ones I haven't done yet but want to . . ." He begins to think them aloud: "grey jet . . . magpie . . . tundra swan . . ." The spirit flock waiting in the stone.

*"This is a good place to stop," Angell says as he lifts away the power grinder that has just granted disc eyes to the rock. "I'm excited, I'm stimulated, and now I can take that stimulation over here," turning to where a green serpentine flatfish waits to have its fins created, "and do some of this."*

*Behind him on the sculpting block, grey alabaster by now is not just itself, but uncannily, indubitably, intrinsically owl.* ◡



## RICHARD SCHMID Gilcrease Rendezvous Exhibition

### EXHIBITION/SALE PAINTINGS

- "Berkshire Forest" (1985), 16 inches by 20 inches, oil
- "Carnations and Begonias" (1985), 20 inches by 28 inches, oil
- "Des Moines House" (1985), 14 inches by 24 inches, oil
- "Gretchen Sketching" (1985), 20 inches by 30 inches, oil
- "Iowa Spring" (1985), 8 inches by 12 inches, oil
- "Jamie and Gretchen" (1985), 18 inches by 24 inches, oil

### EXHIBITION/RETROSPECTIVE PAINTINGS

- "Bengal Tiger" (1971), 16 inches by 20 inches, gouache  
Lent from a private collection
- "Boy With a Flower" (1963), 12 inches by 18 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "Bowery" (1972), 16 inches by 24 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "Cheryl" (1971), 19 inches by 24 inches, charcoal  
Lent from a private collection
- "Christmas Still Life" (1972), 24 inches by 32 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "Gift to Gretchen" (1967), 30 inches by 40 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "Gretchen at 7" (1974), 16 inches by 20 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "Guadeloupe Grove" (1977), 18 inches by 24 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "Hans" (1962), 18 inches by 22 inches, conte crayon  
Lent from a private collection
- "Jan" (1976), 10 inches by 12 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "Jan" (1962), 36 inches by 60 inches, oil  
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. William Kirberger, Bartlesville, Oklahoma
- "Jan and Bettina" (1964), 30 inches by 40 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "Lillies and Lemons" (1977), 20 inches by 26 inches, oil  
Lent by Wayne and Barbara Rumley
- "Lorie" (1972), 16 inches by 21 inches, charcoal  
Lent from a private collection
- "Michelle" (1978), 7 inches by 11 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "Molly Sewing" (1981), 16 inches by 20 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection

- "Jody's Dolls" (1985), 24 inches by 36 inches, oil
- "Molly Sleeping" (1985), 10 inches by 16 inches, oil
- "Nude" (1985), 18½ inches by 14½ inches, conte crayon
- "Nude" (1985), 17¾ inches by 14¾ inches, conte crayon
- "Standing Nude" (1985), 18 inches by 14 inches, oil
- "Tea Roses" (1985), 10 inches by 18 inches, oil

- "Molly's Dolls" (1981), 24 inches by 36 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "November Maples" (1981), 20 inches by 30 inches, oil  
Lent by Wayne and Barbara Rumley
- "Peaches and Silver" (1980), 33½ inches by 39½ inches, oil  
Lent by Wayne and Barbara Rumley
- "Spring Floodwater" (1973), 12 inches by 18 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "Standing Nude" (1964), 24 inches by 36 inches, conte crayon  
Lent from a private collection
- "Susan" (1971), 20 inches by 24 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "Susan" (1971), 16 inches by 19 inches, conte crayon  
Lent from a private collection
- "Sycamore" (1971), 24 inches by 36 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "Taos Alley" (1976), 24 inches by 34 inches, oil  
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. William Kirberger, Bartlesville, Oklahoma
- "The Iron Fence" (1971), 16 inches by 30 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "The Red Shawl" (1976), 24 inches by 30 inches, oil  
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. William Kirberger, Bartlesville, Oklahoma
- "Tug Boat" (1967), 8 inches by 16 inches, oil  
Lent from a private collection
- "Virginia Winter" (1984), 20 inches by 28 inches, oil  
Lent by Wayne and Barbara Rumley