

The Facts on Airbrushing Taxidermy
By John H. Peterson & Bren Southerland

BRING 'EM BACK TO LIFE! (SORT OF)



As a photographer, I am always looking for unique and interesting subjects to catch on film. When airbrush artist Bren Southerland of Las Vegas, Nevada, mentioned taxidermy art, I wasn't particularly interested. I have seen many mounted critters, all lacking the realism one would expect. Bren, however, wanted me to understand taxidermy as an art form, not just a matter of spraying a little paint. Knowing nothing of airbrushing, I thought the art form was knowing how to work the equipment. There were, after all, only two colors—it was a simple matter of using pink for the mouth and black for the nose. The animal, a mountain lion, had been mounted and painted ten years earlier. I saw the piece before any re-putty work was done. It looked like many others did, unnatural. On the day the painting took place, the piece had already been re-done to fix cracks and other flaws. With a background in taxidermy, Bren was able to do this preparation himself. The studio is well ventilated, and Bren stressed the need to wear a proper mask at all times. With the big cat ready to go, we took these steps to execute a successful and impressive taxidermy paint job.



STEP 1 Three paint colors—black, bright pink and burnt umber—are prepared. A lacquer-based acrylic automotive paint (in this case DuPont) is used, partly for its structure. The lacquer-based acrylic sticks well to the porous skin and, by flaking the paint, any overspray can be easily removed from the hair without damage. Pink is sprayed inside the mouth, on the front part of the nose, and around the eyes with an Iwata Custom Micron C airbrush. The pink is also used as a basecoat to even out the skin pigment.

STEP 2 Bren oversprays the nose with the burnt umber, giving it an orange color (which looks far more real than the black/pink in

the original). A heavy layer of brown is sprayed around the eyes.

STEP 3 Black is now applied around the eyes. With this three-color combination, the eyes immediately begin to give the impression the animal is alive. Bren has studied photographs of live animals to achieve this realism. "There is a difference in color when the animal is alive," he says. When he works on the inside of the ears, he uses a toothbrush to comb the hair out of the way.

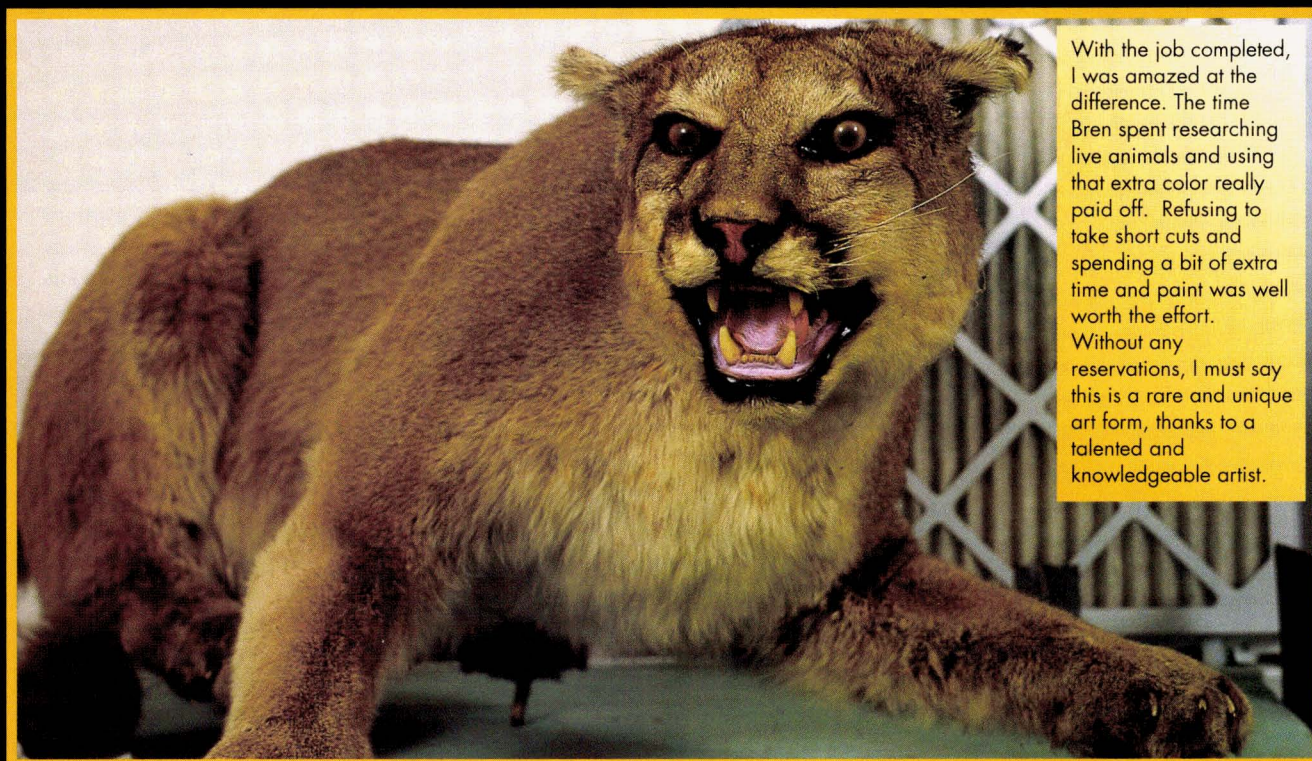
STEP 4 Black is used for the lips and inside the nostrils. To give these areas a "wet" look, heavy paint is applied. This type of paint is glossy and works well in creating a moist appearance.



STEP 5 Once the painting is completed, the clean up begins. Any paint on the hair will flake off easily. Removing paint from the eyes is just as easy, but a little bit more involved. Bren uses an X-Acto blade to score the paint to the edges of the eyes and peel it away. A cotton swab with lacquer thinner is used to polish the glass eyes

and remove any excess paint. To avoid dripping, the swab should be wrung out to avoid dripping.

STEP 6 Using a cotton swab and lacquer thinner, Bren cleans the teeth. It is important to avoid the gum line because this process will ruin the natural look of the gum at the base of the teeth.



With the job completed, I was amazed at the difference. The time Bren spent researching live animals and using that extra color really paid off. Refusing to take short cuts and spending a bit of extra time and paint was well worth the effort. Without any reservations, I must say this is a rare and unique art form, thanks to a talented and knowledgeable artist.

Photographs by John H. Peterson

TECH FILE

AIRBRUSH: Iwata Custom Micron C, Custom Micron SB, HP-BC, Eclipse HP-B, HP-C, Vega (for T-shirts), Sharpe 75 (for large areas). **AIR SOURCE:** Pro-Air 6.5 hp, 80 gal. with a multi-station set-up. **PAINT MEDIA:** DuPont, House of Kolor, Com-art, Createx. **MASK:** 3M tape, Blue Line tape, frisk, Medea freehand shields. **VENTILATION:** 3M respirator, homemade exhaust fan and doors wide open. **PROJECTOR:** Super AG Artograph



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Bren Southerland owns JBS Grafix Design. He has been painting for fourteen years. In addition to his work for the taxidermist, he paints on T-shirts, automotive, canvas, illustration board, wood, helmets and snowboard.