



# HUNTING

*Laurel Barbieri's connection to primitive artists is more than inspiration: It's all about the hunt.*

# FOR ART

*By Ron Spomer*

here. See them?"  
 "No."  
 "More toward the sun. Just at the edge of the brush." The professional hunter pointed toward a small herd of red beasts, noses to the grass, hooked horns bobbing, black tails swishing.  
 "Oh! There they are," the woman with the rifle whispered. "Those are hartebeest, right? Red hartebeest?"  
 "Yes. Are you ready?"  
 "What? Oh, we're going to shoot one?"  
 "We're going to try. Get behind me so they see only one of us and get down when I do. They are feeding away. I think we can get close."  
 The pair started forward, crouched in that familiar posture human hunters have been assuming for hundreds of thousands of years, some in this very place, on these very

sands, perhaps stalking the ancestors of these very hartebeests surrounded by this same sunrise cacophony of cooing doves and cackling francolins.

**B**eauty and the beast. Sensitive souls question how anyone can revere a magnificent beast by painting it one day, hunting and eating it the next. Yet that's what humans have been doing since the first lines were scratched on the walls of the Lascaux cave. Elegant lines. Primitive, ethereal images that capture more than just shadows of beasts. They capture the spirits of the animals and the spirits of the humans who painted them. Clearly, those cave artists were hunters, and they eloquently expressed their respect and appreciation for their prey.

Laurel Barbieri, our modern "cave artist," follows in that tradition, yet she

came to both her art and the art of the hunt rather late in life.

"Do you visit Africa a lot?" I asked after seeing her paintings at an SCI convention. They bore remarkable similarities to San Bushman rock paintings across southern Africa.

"No, I've never been to Africa," she informed me.

"But your work is so reminiscent of Bushman paintings. I assumed you'd been there and gotten inspired."

Turns out her inspiration is more original, more personal, more organic, harking back to a rustic childhood in the outdoors reignited by a mid-life discovery, or rediscovery, of the heart.

In her teens Barbieri fled a rough, rural lifestyle to begin carving out a successful career in corporate America, reveling in all the trappings of modern American life she'd never known as a



child in a small cabin at the end of a backwoods road. Big house, full pantry, new cars, swimming pool. She'd worked hard and earned them.

"But something was missing," she explained, and that something was her connection to the land.

"I was living in suburban, flatland Texas, commuting to all the major cities in the US and burning out."

On hiatus, she revisited the Pacific Northwest of her youth and rediscovered mountains, glaciers, the wind in the firs . . . and an untapped passion to paint what she felt.

"It came suddenly," she said of her impetus to paint. "I'd had no art training, but I started painting an elk scene for my boyfriend, Robert, hoping to give him something unique. I pondered long and hard in an effort to understand why he

was so passionate about his hunting. And that pondering battered down a door I'd closed against my childhood when I, too, used to be a hunter-gatherer of sorts."

She had to catch herself for a moment in the telling, blinking up at the lights in the convention hall until recomposed.

"Anyway, all these emotions flooded over me and I found myself remembering my childhood fascination with geology, the richly textured rock walls where I sheltered in the rainforest and dreamed of adventuring on the Zambezi with Livingstone. Oh, I was a romantic dreamer. I recalled the rich colors and textures of those rocks, their ballet of color, texture, and motion, and I just knew that had to be a part of my painting."

They did and they still do, Barbieri layering her paints to create depth and texture.

"I was so moved by that experience that I started hunting after that, joining Robert

and his family at their traditional elk camp where I get new inspiration every year. I want my paintings to capture what I experience out there, what the Lascaux artists had captured so long ago—an authentic celebration of life."

Barbieri's passion and enthusiasm were so genuine, so powerful that my wife and I immediately invited her to join us on a summer adventure to Immenhof Ranch in the Namibian Hochlands. Werner von Seydlitz and his father, Freddy, are restoring the family farm to the wildlife cornucopia that it had been historically, replacing inefficient domestic grazers with a panoply of better adapted, more productive native species.

"You'll love Immenhof," Betsy and I told Laurel. "Not only do they hunt all kinds of plains game such as oryx and kudu and eland, but they've got Bushman rock art and singing rocks where Bushmen danced and pounded on giant boulders that ring like anvils. There's even a 'tracking school,' dozens of life-size animal tracks chipped into bedrock. And we can visit a living-history

museum where San dress and live as they did two hundred years ago."

**W**e went in late June, the cool, dry winter season in this desert nation of 2.3 million people, the second-least densely populated country on earth. Sand. Rock. Mountains. Thorn veldt. Like anyone who appreciates the natural world, Laurel was eager to see this land and its animals, but she was just as curious about the San Bushman, their rock art, and what it might tell her about her own evolution as an artist-hunter.

"I don't think I was a Bushman in a previous life," she laughed. "But I'm deeply curious about this seeming dichotomy of the hunter-artist," she explained. "I know how I feel about it, and I have a hunch other artists and other cultures feel much the same thing." That thing, as she elucidated, is honor and respect multiplied.

"I respect it while I hunt for it, when I try my best to make a perfect shot. My

friends and I honor it again when we pack it out of the canyon and toast it 'round the campfire. And then I truly honor it when I eat it and make it a part of me. Finally, I honor it again when I try to capture its spirit in a painting. I think ancient rock painters were doing the same thing."

**L**aurel's introduction to African hunting was gradual and smartly planned to help her acclimate. Freddy and Werner met us at the Windhoek airport for one of their famous air safaris, which took us to a few scenic and wildlife wonders such as the Namib-Naukluft National Park, the famous red dunes of Sossusvlei, the Skeleton Coast around the city of Swakopmund and Etosha National Park, a wildlife cornucopia.

By the time we arrived at Immenhof Guest Farm and the nearby Erongo Mountains to hunt and visit with San Bushmen, Laurel had seen the dik dik and the elephant, the zebra and the rhino. She had trudged over the

hot, sinking sands and observed the sturdy oryx. She'd felt the threat of the slinking lion and the agitation of a nervous herd of kudu. Here was life in abundance in the very land where hominids arose, sustained by that life for tens of thousands of years. How had that influenced their artistic expression?

"My guide at Etosha, Emelda, opened my eyes to what must be a universal trait in humans who live close to the earth—an incredible talent for spotting wildlife," Barbieri told us after her fourth day in Namibia. "She could drive that safari van, carry on a conversation, and still spot more animals than all six of us tourists combined. She was born in Etosha and knows it intimately, yes, but she explained her game-spotting skills the same way I explain my inspiration for painting. 'I just feel it,' she told me. Doesn't that perfectly describe the best wildlife

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art, from charcoal on caves to oil on canvas? Hunters capture their prey to eat and to celebrate, then to remember through taxidermy, photographs, sculptures, or paintings.”

The Portland artist’s next discovery included the artifacts of the ancient San hunter-gatherer culture weathering on Immenhof. Small paintings on a vertical outcropping of granite, partly stained by rock dassie urine. Nearby, giant boulders pocked with divots from generations of Bushmen ringing them with striking stones.

“They sound like great slabs of iron!” an astounded Laurel said as she and Freddy tapped out a rhythm.

“Imagine a family or two of Bushmen here, possibly celebrating after killing a big eland with meat enough for weeks,” Freddy said. “Feasting and dancing, fires burning through the night. It must have been quite a party.”

Farther along on a rising bulge of bedrock were eland, giraffe, hartebeest, and oryx prints chipped into the stone.

“A tracking school is what we think,” Freddy explained. “Instead of having to draw the prints in the sand again and again, they could bring the children here to clearly show them the differences among the tracks. This is a oryx, shaped so. Compare that to the kudu here and so on.”

Laurel squatted beside the tracks, cast her gaze across the thorn veldt, thinking. “It was all about the hunt, wasn’t it?” she said. “Which is the same as saying it’s all about life. This was their life, right here, living off this land, living with this land. Knowing one track from another wasn’t a matter of curiosity. It was a matter of life and death. As much as a deer or elk means to me, how much more did a springbuck or oryx mean to these people?”

At the nearby Bushman living-history display Barbieri visited and danced with the women and children, watched young men build arrows and dig for the grubs they use to poison the points. She shot their tiny bows and watched them stalk through the dry grass before returning to the flimsy grass huts against a massive rock wall where the clan gathered ’round a fire, their contorted shadows painting the walls.

Laurel was ready to hunt the next day, to walk in the footsteps of the hunter-artists who’d mastered this environment for tens of thousands of years, ready to tread the same rock and gravel, weave and bend through thickets and thorns, scan the far horizon and scour the close coverts, follow pockmarks through

shifting sands behind the sharp eyes of Werner, who’s known as “the White Bushman.” He is that good.

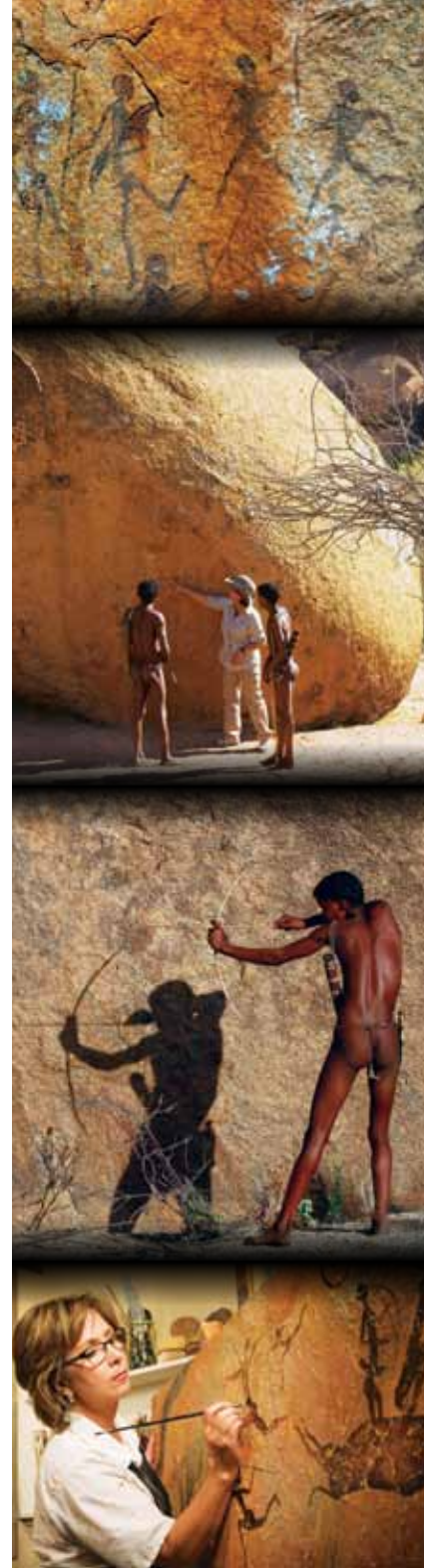
Werner grew up under the tutelage of several Bantu hunters on Immenhof, but in his late teens he had an opportunity to train for two full seasons with a Bushman.

“The Bantu like Jordan here are excellent trackers,” Werner explained, “but this Bushman, ach, he was something else. Could read a track like a book but also interpret it and guess ahead. He knew game so well I think he knew what it was going to do before they did. I was lucky to study under him.”

And he studied well. Werner can track through dry sand at a brisk walking pace, staying on one animal’s spoor despite crossing other game tracks, old or fresh, even of the same species. It’s uncanny, but he claims it’s nothing special compared with an experienced Bushman. I have my doubts. Laurel was in good hands with Werner, but she still had to hunt.

“It was a challenge,” she admitted at dinner after her first day. “But it’s different from my deer and elk hunts in Oregon. There we fight cold, sometimes snow, and always gravity. Deep canyons. Steep. Here it’s heat and the pull of sand, the branches and thorns and having to duck under them.”

Another difference, one Laurel really



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liked, was the diversity and abundance of wildlife. “You never know what you’re bumping into next. Kudu absolutely take my breath away, and warthogs are almost silly. But giraffes! Oh my, the way they tower above the brush and the slow, graceful way they move. Even when they’re alarmed they’re slow and graceful.”

Despite their best efforts, Werner and Laurel didn’t take a red hartebeest from the herd they stalked at the beginning of this story. But later that morning they came upon tracks of another herd and followed them to a satisfying conclusion.

“Make your rifle ready,” Werner

instructed as he slowly spread his tripod and stood it before Laurel. “I will tell which one. There is an old cow hartebeest I see that we can take if the brush is clear.”


“Wait. Red hartebeest? But I see a wildebeest,” Laurel said. Werner lowered his binocular and looked at her, followed her gaze to a blue wildebeest that had walked in from the left. “Ah, no, the hartebeest are farther to the left. See that one tree sticking above the rest? Just beneath that.”

She saw them then and pushed her Blaser into the fork of the tripod.

“Do you see the one by itself? There are two to its right and the rest





A landscape of dead trees in a white salt flat against a red sky. The trees are dark, gnarled, and leafless, standing in a stark, desolate environment. The ground is a flat, white expanse, and the sky is a deep, uniform red. The overall scene is one of extreme aridity and environmental hardship.

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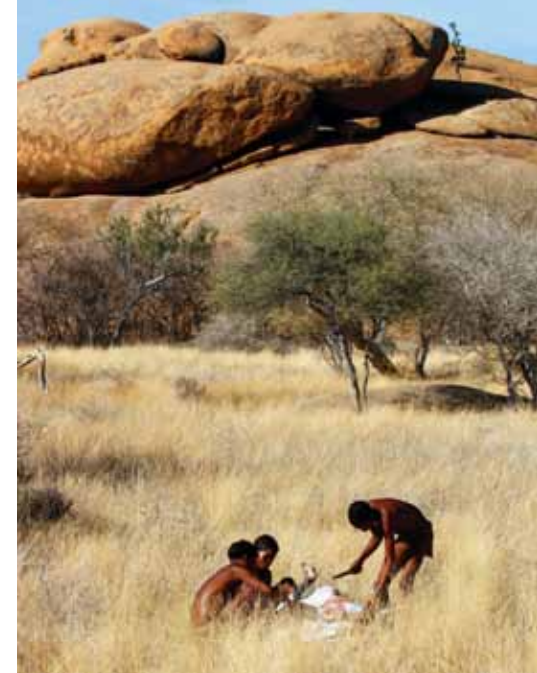
live in the harshest deserts such as the Kalahari proves how technologically advanced they were.

"I'm so full of ideas now that I can't wait to start painting them. It had to be the same for whoever painted on rocks and caves, right? I've read the experts' theories about spirits and religious significance of eland figures and all that, and who knows. . . Can't it be that these were just people like us? Couldn't they have painted at least some of this just to celebrate the hunt, maybe to honor their prey, themselves?"

"Makes sense to me," I said.

"They were recording life," Barbieri observed. "Their lives. Important things in it. And probably their love of it all. I hunt to provide myself and family with honest, pure organic meat. I paint what I paint because I feel it. It gives me joy and heals my soul. Ancient hunters were no different. Food, water, shelter, one another, love. That's all they needed. That's all we need. The rest is just window dressing."

I have a hunch Barbieri's next paintings will be some fine window dressing, indeed. ■



to the left in a bunch."

"I think so. Did she just turn her head to the right and back again?" She had her face to the stock now, looking through the scope set on 6x.

"Yes. That's the one. If you have a clear shot, put it right on the shoulder and shoot."

The .308 Winchester popped, but the confirming *whop* of the bullet hitting home did not return. "You missed."

"No. I couldn't have. I was right on the shoulder." They went forward then and quickly spotted the rounded form of the hartebeest lying still.

"I knew I didn't miss." Laurel was relieved as much as pleased. The bullet hole was spot on the shoulder.

That night the kitchen presented Laurel with a heaping plate of delicacies from her hartebeest. Liver, kidneys, heart. She dutifully tasted each but saved her appetite for the loin steaks the next night. I indulged seconds on the liver, some of the mildest of any I'd ever enjoyed, then asked my new artistic friend if she'd reached any conclusions about hunting and primitive art.

"Hard as it is for us to shoot game with our modern rifles, scopes, and bullets, think how much harder it was with bows and poisoned arrows," Laurel said. "And as much as I appreciate this meat, what would it have meant to them? That they could



### Gear Tests

To minimize the hassles of air travel, Laurel shared Betsy's Blaser R8 with a .308 Winchester barrel while I used an R8 of my own in 7mm Rem. Mag. In case anyone wanted to try for an eland, zebra, or other large game, we brought a .375 H&H barrel, which I used to drop a bull eland in its tracks with a single shot. Betsy made perfect one-shot kills on blue and black wildebeest with the .308 Win.

While zeroing and warming up, Laurel and Betsy punched six shots into one tight cluster, which is pretty standard for R8 rifles. Unusual was that they did it with two different loads. NormaUSA 165-grain Oryx and 150-grain Kalahari bullets both shot to the same point at 100 yards. The bonded core Oryx is a classic, rugged, proven bullet I've used many times to take a variety of plains game, so I wanted to see how the new, monolithic (copper alloy) Kalahari performed. This solid shank, hollow nose projectile is engineered to expand instantly, throw six petals from the nose for radial dispersion while the shank continues driving. Five quick, one-shot kills indicated this was happening. Three bullets shot through, but we recovered one 7mm 125-grain from an oryx and one 150-grain .308 from Betsy's black wildebeest. The 7mm had shed five nose petals, the .308 three. A 300-grain Oryx caught my eland in the neck, killing it instantly. Maximum expansion was 1.2 inch.

We fitted each R8 barrel with Leupold VX-3 scopes, a rugged, consistent, American-made line that has served me well around the world with never a glitch. Betsy and Laurel worked with the 30mm tube 4.5-14x40mm with side parallax adjustment. I put the lightweight, compact 2.5-8x36mm on the .375 H&H barrel and a 4.5-14x40mm 1-inch tube on my 7mm Rem. Mag.

The consistency of the compact, travel friendly Blaser R8 modular system is impressive. Triggers, barrels, scopes, and even bolt heads can be removed and replaced in less than a minute and the rifles maintain zero.

For details on touring and hunting with Werner von Seydlitz and Immenhof Air Safaris, visit [www.immenhofhunting.com](http://www.immenhofhunting.com).

—R. S.