Making a 3-D Faerie Portrait

By David E. Parvin, A.L.I.

In this article, I will explain how my assistants and I transformed a young lady into a three dimensional faerie portrait. The process that we used involved four steps: making a life casting of the model, enhancing the life casting, making a mold of the enhanced life casting, and casting the finished portrait. For anyone interested in learning more about the process, see the end of this article for sources of materials and information.

Often I have been asked this about the creative process, "Which comes first, the idea or the model?" Usually it's the idea and then I look for the right subject or model. But sometimes, as was in this case, the model has been the inspiration. Recently, an aspiring young ballerina, Caylie, and her mother, Sue, introduced themselves having recognized me from my involvement with Denver's dance community. I couldn't help but be impressed with how much Caylie looked like a faerie and I said so to Sue who told me I wasn't the first to say that. I invited them to come by my studio even though I had no specific idea of what we might do other than something faerie-like. But before we met again, I got to thinking that Caylie would make a great faerie portrait. Of course, with the right modifications, **anybody** can be turned into a believable faerie. It's just that Caylie's naturally occurring *faerieness* inspired me to begin this project.

I stated above that we started with a life casting, a process by which a mold is made directly from the model and if done properly captures an exact likeness in amazing detail right down to the skin texture. Life casting has been around for a very long time, at least 3000 years. Historically, the process usually involved covering a deceased subject with plaster and making a death mask. But now we now have materials that reproduce detail to a much higher degree, are approved for skin contact, and can be used on living subjects comfortably and harmlessly. The most commonly used is **alginate** which was developed for making dental impressions. Its primary ingredient is made from seaweed and getting covered with alginate is similar to getting a seaweed treatment at an exclusive spa.

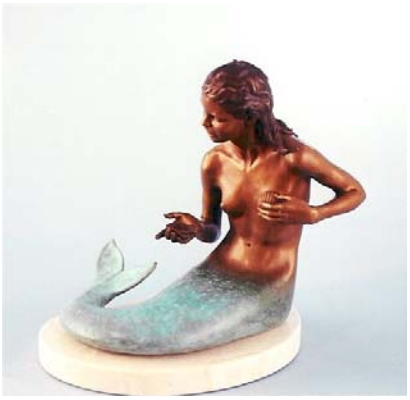

Photo #1

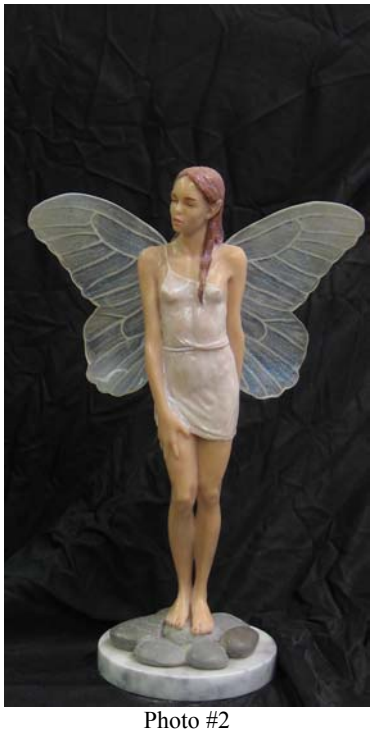

Photo #2

Of course, I could have sculpted Caylie in the more traditional method of having her sit for me while I shaped her likeness in wax or clay and then cast it in bronze or resin as in my pieces shown in photographs #1 and #2, "The Shell Game" and "Asrai." But life casting is analogous to "three dimensional photography" and just as a photograph can be more real and personal than a painting or drawing, so can a life casting be when compared to a regular sculpture. The criticism of life casting is that it is somehow "cheating." (1) But life casting is just another art form and while it may look easy, or at least easier than more traditional sculpting, doing it well does take some knowledge and practice. As in photography, anyone can take a snapshot, but not just anyone can be an Ansel Adams.

Step 1: Making a Life Casting of Caylie

I was confident that Caylie at thirteen would have no problem being cast; usually a child eight or older will endure and even enjoy the process. But to introduce her to and make her comfortable with life casting, I suggested that we first cast her foot en pointe, something all dancers are eager to do. Photo #3 shows an excited Caylie and her mom looking over her finished foot.

In photograph #4, my very able assistant, Audra Vaughn, and

I were preparing Caylie's hair with a thick conditioner to prevent her hair from becoming stuck in the alginate that would cover her. My models usually tell me that well conditioned hair was an unexpected bonus. Photograph #5 shows Audra securing a piece of cloth to cover up her Caylie's developing *assets*. The cloth was fitted tightly so as to be invisible under whatever faerie garb we later decide to add. While her left ear was completely exposed, her right ear, not shown, protruded through her hair in a very faerie-like manner.

Alginate is purchased as a powder and mixed with water to a consistency that is thin enough to spread on but thick enough to stay in place. Notice in photograph #6 that Caylie was leaning against a padded board that was tilted back about ten degrees for her comfort while Audra and I applied the alginate. While it might seem logical to have the model lie down, her hair, face, and any soft body parts such as breasts would be distorted. The alginate used here was FiberGel by Artmolds which gels to a soft rubber-like state in about five minutes.

It is necessary to reinforce the alginate so that when it is removed from the model, it will retain its shape. In photograph #7, Audra and I were applying a layer of cheese cloth and very fast setting plaster. This supporting mold is referred to as the "mother" mold. Notice that the nostrils were kept clear for her to breathe during the whole procedure which only took about twenty minutes. It is never necessary or even recommended to put straws into someone's nose, not only can they distort the nostrils but if bumped can injure the model.

In photograph #8, the mold had just been removed and an excited Caylie had soft skin and well conditioned hair. Audra and I made a plaster cast from the mold which was completed by the time Caylie emerged from the shower, photograph #9.

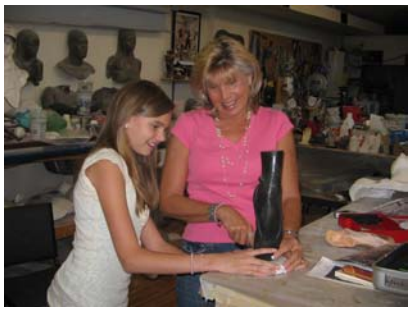
Photo #3

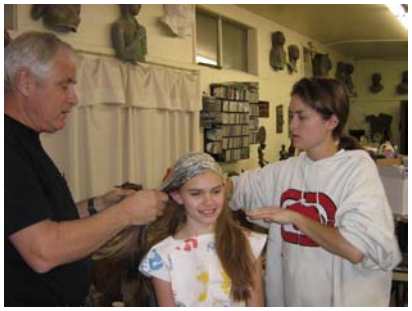
Photo #4

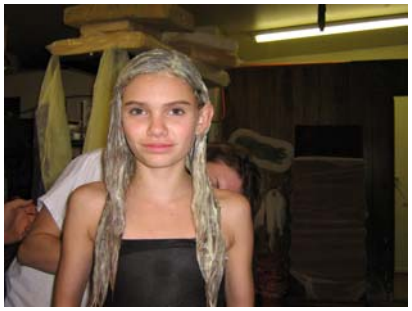
Photo #5

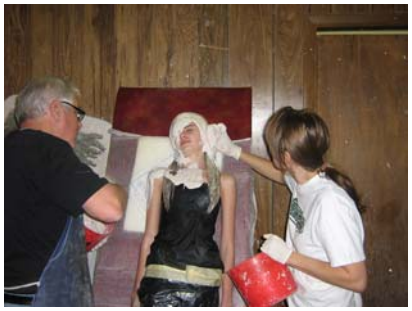
Photo #6

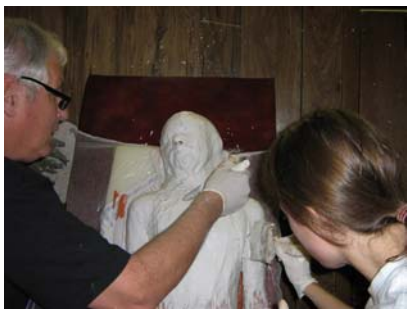
Photo #7

<u>Step 2: Enhancing the Plaster Casting</u>

There are always at least some repairs that need to be made to the plaster cast such as trimming the back to lie flat and fixing any small imperfections. I then had a plaster cast of the human Caylie which was too nice to waste. I went ahead and made a rubber mold of the plaster and made a cold cast bronze copy for Caylie. (Photograph #10) The process used was the same as described below for the faerie portrait. At that point, I was ready to begin the really fun part, turning Caylie into a faerie.

The first thing I did was to refresh myself on what a faerie should look like. Fortunately there is a helpful book with the encouraging title *How to Draw and Paint Fairies*. (2.) Looking through the book, I realized that all I needed to do was give her pointed ears; open her eyes; and add some faerie accessories such as flowers, leaves, and wings.

Pointing the ears was a cinch. They were shaped in sculpting wax which adheres nicely to dry plaster. The great thing about pointing the ears was that there was no right or wrong, I just experimented until the ears <u>looked</u> right to me. My only real concern was to be sure not to make the ears so big that she looked sinister like a werwolf.

I had Caylie return to the studio and sit for me so that I could get her eyes right. Unfortunately, opening the eyes doesn't require that you just scrape part of the eyelids off. When a person opens her eyes, the tissue surrounding the eyes

changes shape somewhat. So you have to add back as well as take away. This was also done with melted wax which was added on and then shaped as necessary. I used dental tools both for the carving the plaster and shaping the wax.

For her faerie outfit, we went to a craft store and purchased an assortment of artificial leaves and flowers. We glued the leaves flat on the body to make it look as if she were wearing a dress made of leaves. A garland of flowers would be added around her head at a later stage.

Since the finished faerie portrait would be a "relief" wall hanging, we attached the plaster casting to a 24 inch round piece of 3/4 inch fiberboard that would frame the work and provide a background for constructing the wings which were made in clay. (Photograph #11.) The next step was to make a mold of the new Caylie in silicone rubber.

Step 3: Making a Mold of the Enhanced Casting.

Rubber usually consists of two liquids, a base and a catalyst, though sometimes other components are added for specific applications. Once mixed together, the components set up into what we would recognize as rubber. In photograph #12, I had just painted the first of three layers of liquid rubber into the portrait.

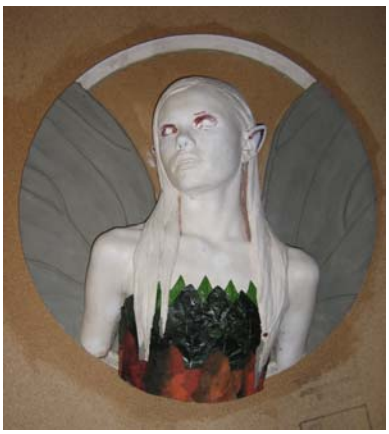

Photo #11

Photo #8

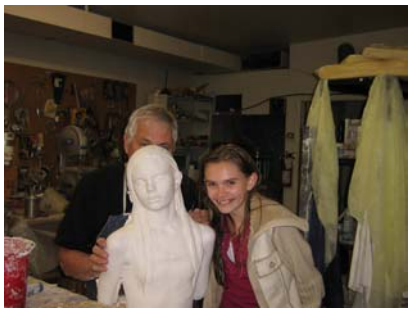

Photo #9

Photo #10

Just as with the alginate mold, a supporting or "mother" mold was necessary for the rubber to maintain its shape when removed from the plaster. For this purpose, I used Forton MG (3). The same Forton MG would be used below with metal and limestone powders to make the final casting. Because of the undercuts on both sides of the face and shoulders, the rigid mother mold had to be constructed in four pieces in order to separate from the rubber layer.

Step 4: Casting the Finished Portrait.

I decided to cast the skin parts and the area above her head in white by using Forton MG with powdered limestone which when buffed would simulate white marble. Her dress, wings, hair, and the molding at the top were Forton MG to which copper powder had been added producing a very credible cold cast bronze. The hair was turned black and the leaves and wings became green by using different patina solutions. The garland of flowers around her forehead was a string of artificial flowers that was coated with Forton MG with brass powder. A light blue wash was applied to the area above her so as to distinguish it from the flesh areas. Everything except the flowers was polished with soft cloth buffing wheels with either white or brown buffing compounds. The completed 3-D portrait is shown in photograph #13.

Earlier, I described life casting as "3-D photography" which begs the question as to why we didn't just get Caylie a faerie costume and take her picture, a much simpler way to go. There are two reasons. The first is that what we did, in my opinion, is far more impressive. The second is permanence. The Forton MG material that I have mentioned was developed for architectural

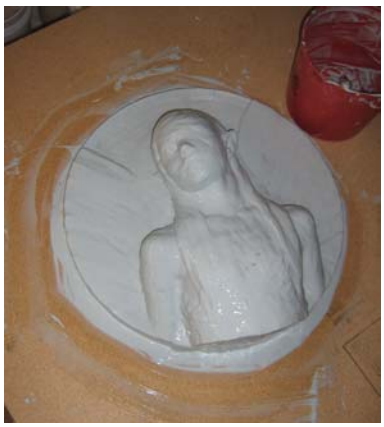

Photo #12

accouterments for the outsides of buildings and will last and last. Kept indoors, anything cast in Forton MG should last virtually forever, as in until the Sun goes supernova. Long after everything else that recorded that Caylie existed has turned to dust, this 3-D portrait should still survive. I told her to expect that in a few hundred years, it may show up on "Antiques Road Show." The art expert will probably say, "When you brought in your great, great, great, great, great, great grandmother's portrait, I got really excited because I immediately recognized it as a genuine *Parvin* (it's my fantasy!) from the early 21st century. Do you have any idea as to its worth? No. Well it should be worth a couple million dollars; but since you made a lamp out of her..."

1. I wrote an article titled "Life *Casting, Fine Art or Cheating"* in the April 2001 issue of *Sculpture Journal* which I will gladly e-mail to anyone who wants it. See below for contact information.
2. *How to Draw and Paint Fairies*, Linda Raverscroft, 2005, ISBN 08230 2383 4
3. There are any number of materials that can be utilized for mother molds and the final castings each with advantages and disadvantages in cost, weight, strength, toxicity, odor, ease of use, etc. I prefer Forton MG which has the best all around advantages and the least disadvantages of anything I know. Its components are a hydrocal, a resin, a hardener, an acrylic based liquid. Various additives will give it special characteristics such a marble or bronze appearance.
4. Fortunately for anyone interested in more information on life casting, there is a source for that has everything needed including instructional videos and all the materials used for this article. Artmolds is the only company that whose sole purpose is to meet the needs of life casters. Artmolds products are available at art supply stores world wide and may be reached at artmolds.com or by calling (866) ART-MOLDS, (866) 278-6653.

Bio

Dave Parvin was born in the Midwest, raised in the Northwest, and has lived in the Denver area for the last thirty years. The artistic path for him has taken a circuitous path. Though a beginning sculptor by the age of three, there were detours to study for the priesthood, earn a degree in biology, fly helicopters for the Marine Corps in Viet Nam, remain married to the same person for over 36 years, and raise a son to manhood to begin repeating the process with two young grandsons.

Dave's primary subject is the human form which he executes in a very realistic manner from miniature to over life size. Presently, he is lead sculptor on a veterans' tribute garden for a suburb of Denver which includes eight nine feet tall bronze statues. While best known for his traditional bronze sculptures, Dave has worked in wood, Forton MG, pewter, glass, resins, Raku, concrete, acrylic, and others. About twenty years ago, Dave began life casting and has become an innovator in this art form developing techniques and products that are commonly used throughout the life casting community. Dave was one of the first to be honored with a lifetime membership in the Association of Life Casters International. He is also one of only four persons to be given the title of "Certified Life Casting Instructor" by the same organization. Dave has written over forty published articles on sculpting and has two instructional DVDs. He feels a responsibility to pass on to others what he had learned and offers workshops several times a year on various sculpture subjects including life casting.

Always eager to discuss art, aviation, and grandchildren, he may be reached at parvinstudio@comcast.net or (303) 321-1074.

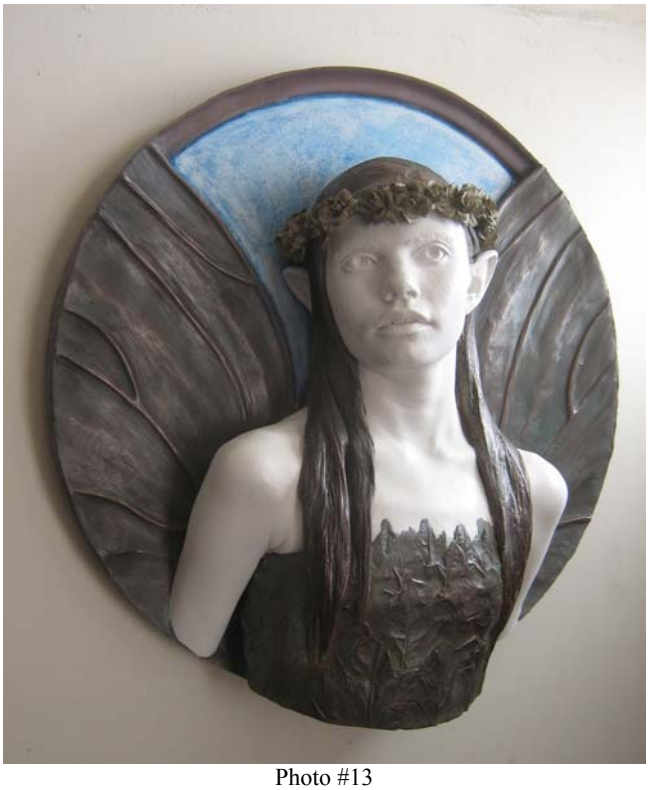

Photo #13