

A Little More Complicated Portrait Castings

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

Recently, I described casting praying hands. Whether just hands alone or as part of a portrait, praying hands is sure to please almost any client. In this article, I will offer two examples which are more complicated but will demonstrate what can be done with a little imagination.

Often I have been asked, “Which comes first, the idea or the model?” If a client comes to you wanting to be depicted in a certain way, you do the best you can with the hand you have been dealt. “Can you make me look like a kumquat?” “Why sure young lady.” In fact, she might look more like a radish, but kumquat it is.” After all, there’s a mortgage to be paid and groceries to be bought. But if I am doing something for myself, usually the idea comes first and then I look for the right subject or model. But sometimes, as was in this first example, the model can be the inspiration. It began when 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 have said 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. Had she looked like a kumquat...

My idea was to start with a life casting and then turn her into a



Photo 1

faerie. 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 piece, “Asrai” shown in photograph #1. 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. Some may think that I was just following an easier path. But life casting is just another art form with its own advantages and disadvantages 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.

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 put her at ease, I suggested that we first cast her foot en pointe, something all dancers are eager to do. Photo #2 shows an excited Caylie and her mom looking over her finished foot.

In photograph #3, my very able assistant, Audra, and I were in the final preparation of Caylie for casting. Her hair had been thoroughly coated with Cholesterol hair conditioner and a piece of cloth covered up her developing *assets*. The cloth had been 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.

In photograph #4, the mold had just been removed and an excited Caylie had soft skin from the seaweed based alginate and well conditioned hair from the Cholesterol. Audra and I made a plaster cast from the mold which was completed by the time Caylie emerged from the shower, photograph #5. 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. After which, I 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 in Forton MG with copper powder, photo #6. At that point, I was ready to begin the really fun part, turning Caylie into a faerie.



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4

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*.(1) 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 looked right to me. My only real concern was to be sure not to make the ears so big that she looked



Photo 5

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 is more complicated than just scraping 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 modified 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 as was the molding along the outer edge. (Photograph #7) The next step was to make a mold of the new Caylie in silicone rubber; the first of three layers of which is shown in photograph #8. The outer or mother mold was made of Forton MG soaked in strips of cotton batting with scrim binder. 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 layers.

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,



Photo 6



Photo 7



Photo 8



Photo 9

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.” Photograph #9 shows the casting fresh out of the mold. The hair was turned black with “Super Antique 40” and the leaves and wings became green by using a home made patina solution (2). 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 portrait is shown in photograph #10.

In my second example my model gets to become a mermaid. While the result is different, the process is essentially the same.

I once sculpted a small bronze statue of a adolescent mermaid trying on shells for the first time.

(Photograph #11) Her left hand held a shell covering her left breast with another shell positioned in her right hand to cover her right breast. For this article, I wanted to tell the same story but there was a problem. While it is perfectly acceptable to sculpt a 1/4 life size adolescent mermaid with one breast exposed, a life casting is more like a photograph. Since it wouldn't have been proper to expose the model's breast that wasn't covered with a shell, I would need a model with hair long enough to preserve her modesty and reputation.

For the faerie portrait, the model looked so much like a faerie that she inspired the piece. But in this case, I had the mermaid idea first and then chose the model. It just so happened that I know a young lady, Laura, who met my criteria.

- #1. She looked like a mermaid.
- #2. She was the right age, 13.
- #3. Her hair was long enough.
- #4. She and her mother, Leslie, loved to visit my studio and play “let's make art history.” I had already done several casts of her and she was excited to be part of the project, perfect.



Photo 10



Photo 11



Photo 12



Photo 13

One of my assistants, Melissa, and I cast Laura in the same way as Caylie above resulting in a plaster positive. (See photograph #12.) After repairing a few minor imperfection, I attached the plaster cast to a 24 inch in diameter piece of fiberboard. I love the line from the old song “The

Streets of Loredó” that goes, “I can tell by your outfit that you are a cowboy.” So all that is needed to make someone into a cowboy, faerie, or mermaid is the right outfit. Add a few sea critters and a tail and presto, one mermaid. The sea critters are no problem; shells and starfish are available from any craft store. I would sculpt the tail in oil based clay. But first, I had to figure out something.

Just what does a mermaid's tail look like. Recently, I had read a hopeful sounding book titled *A Mermaid's Tale*. (2.) Unfortunately, It was “tale” and not “tail” and the book while well worth reading wasn't much help. Amazingly, no one has ever photographed a mermaid and the next best reference was paintings and drawings which offer lots of choices. There isn't even agreement as to how many tails. While most mermaids are depicted with one, some have two as if each leg became separate tails. Further confusion comes from the fact that mermaids are usually covered with scales on their lower half. Fish have scales but sea mammals don't. Scales or not, I have to think of mermaids as warm blooded mammals and not cold blooded fish. I have never seen a mermaid depicted with gills and have to assume that mermaids are air breathing. All this leads me to suspect that mermaids may have scales for some unknown reason, but are more likely to have tails that are mammalian. Unfortunately, there are three very different types of sea mammals: sea otters; whales, porpoises, and dolphins; and seals and sea lions. For my first mermaid, in photo #11, I chose a porpoise style tail and still think that it is the more attractive. So in this case, I decided to do the same. I'm safe unless someone actually takes a photograph of a mermaid and proves me wrong. I'll take my chances.

I intended this mermaid portrait to be a companion piece to the faerie portrait and I wanted both to be the same size. Since I was definitely short on space, I could only show the upper part of the top half of the mermaid. The tail, which I sculpted out of clay, would have to come up behind the head. I was unable to find

the right size small starfish for Laura's hair, so I sculpted one. Shells, both clam and snail, were easier to come by and I added some around the edge of the fiberboard circle. In photo #13, Melissa, is doing some last minute tweaking before we made a mold of the modified Laura in the same way that we had done of the faerie, silicone rubber with a Forton MG mother mold. Forton MG was also used for the final portrait using various additives and dyes for the different parts. Photograph #14 shows me painting in the Forton MG. The finished portrait is in photograph #15.

With a little imagination, the possibilities are limitless, you might even come up with something that would have made old Ansel himself proud.

1. *How to Draw and Paint Fairies*, Linda Raverscroft, 2005, ISBN 08230 2383 4
2. A green patina solution can be made by adding one ounce (28 grams) of cupric chloride and six ounces (168 grams) of ammonium chloride to one half gallon (1.816 liters) of water.
3. *A Mermaid's Tail*, by Amanda Adams, Graystone Books, 2006, ISBN-13: 978-1-55365-117-8.



Photo 14



Photo 15