

# CARVING HIS OWN PATH

INDIGENOUS SCULPTOR AND PAINTER JASON CARTER  
HAS NEVER SHIED AWAY FROM TAKING RISKS

By Sheri Radford



It was noon when Jason Carter arrived home from his morning shift at City TV Edmonton. On a whim, with seven hours to fill before the night class where he was studying to be a television producer, Carter decided to start working on his first-ever soapstone carving. He says, “I jumped into it with a wrench and a screwdriver and a butter knife.”

When it was time to leave for class, Carter instead chose to skip school and continue carving. It took 12 hours in all, but finally the piece was complete—he’d carved a vessel for smudging. Carter never returned to class. “I dropped it, because I’d found my thing.”

That epiphany happened many years ago, and Carter is now an established sculptor, painter, and installation artist in Alberta. A member of the Little Red River Cree Nation, he co-owns a pair of art galleries with actor-playwright Bridget Ryan, his partner in both work and life. They opened the Carter-Ryan Gallery and Live Art Venue in Canmore in 2011,

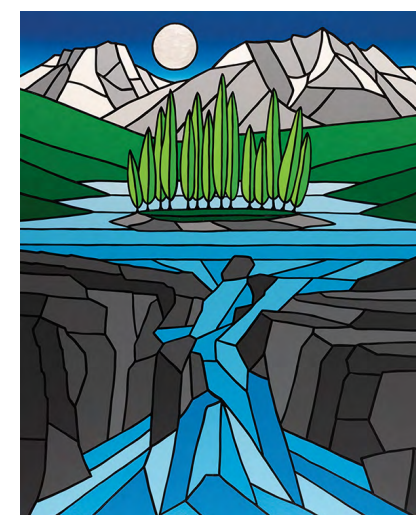
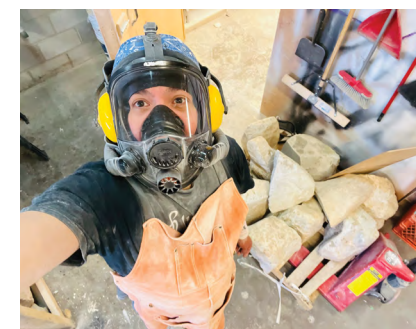
hosting art exhibitions by day and live performances by night, and the Carter-Ryan Gallery in Banff in 2017.

But Carter’s career as an artist was far from preordained. As a teenager, he was unsure what to do with his life. “It took me six years to get my high school diploma because I meandered all the way through it,” he says. He studied graphic design at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology then wound up working for a decade as a cameraman at City TV, where he met Ryan, who was an on-air personality.

When Carter was 20, he happened to see his sister’s boyfriend carving a stone sculpture. “I was fascinated by what he was doing,” Carter remembers. With a laugh, he says, “Christmas rolled around, and I got a rock in a box, which, at the time, was the worst gift I’d ever received.” His sister encouraged him to try carving the stone. “So I did what any normal 20-year-old would do: I used it as a doorstop and hauled that thing around with me for five years, all through college and a new job and moving quite a bit.”

Even after Carter started carving in earnest, it took him a few years before devoting his life to art. He’d been honing his craft at Sun and Moon Visionaries, an Indigenous artisan studio and gallery in Edmonton that has since closed, when he learned the gallery had an opening for a show in five months’ time. He booked the show, printed up 5,000 postcards to promote it, then procrastinated on doing anything further until the final two months. At that point, “I just threw myself at it,” he says. By working nonstop and sleeping very little, he produced 20 sculptures—“rabbits and bears and bison and birds”—along with 40 paintings. With Ryan’s help, that first show was a success. “We had a huge turnout, and I sold 95% of the show,” he says. The couple also self-published a children’s picture book, *Who Is Boo: The Terrific Tales of One Trickster Rabbit*, based on art in that first show. “Bridget wrote a story that interconnected all of the sculptures.”





Carter finds inspiration in things that are “crisp and clean, like 1950 Chevys, and industrial design. I like those hard, clean, beautiful lines.” Inspiration also comes from his heritage. “Every single piece that I do and create is influenced by me as an Indigenous man,” he says. “I’m inspired by all of the Indigenous artists that were before me.” He finds the process of painting to be quite different from carving. “I know what a painting is going to be before I start painting it. I go in with a plan.” This means he can complete a painting while listening to audiobooks. In contrast, he says, “The sculptures are very much a constant creative investment, because I don’t know what they’re going to be when I go in.”

His work has now been shown in countless museums and galleries, at the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games, and at Edmonton International Airport, and he has created large-scale public installations of sculptures and murals. Carter and Ryan have taken a chance on new endeavours such as opening an art gallery (with zero experience) and mounting stage plays (also with zero experience—and with disastrous financial results initially). “It’s just about believing in yourself, taking the risk, and then reaping and being ready for whatever it is that presents itself because you took the risk,” Carter says. “We’re at a happy place where we’re pleasantly busy and having to say no to projects, which is a great place to be.”

Despite all his different projects on the go, Carter tries to spend a minimum of 14 hours each week in the carving studio and another 14 in the painting studio. As for the future, he plans to keep running the galleries and live theatre, to continue creating art, and to shoot a movie from a script that Ryan has written—in other words, he intends to produce more art and take more chances.

“You’re at a dinner party, and you want to tell a story,” he says. “You don’t want the story to end with, ‘And so we didn’t try.’”