TOP

Rusted Leaf Series, No. 3 Year TK, colored pencil, 27 x 25. Dims TK. All artwork this article, collection the artist unless otherwise indicated.

BOTTOM

Bird Nest Series, No. 2

Year TK, colored pencil, dims TK.

Beauty UNDERFOOT

The colored pencil drawings of **David Morrison** reveal the complexity of seemingly humble natural objects.

INTERVIEW BY AUSTIN R. WILLIAMS

In meticulously rendered colored pencil drawings, David Morrison isolates small pieces of the natural world against fields of pristine white space, confronting viewers with the stunning intricacy and beauty of these objects. Morrison's subjects include tree branches and bird nests, many of which he finds near his home in Indiana. "My intention is to show the beauty of a simple flowering branch or fallen residues from trees for the viewer to reexamine the realities of nature," he explains in an artist's statement.

Drawing recently spoke with the artist about selecting subjects, incorporating photography into his process and working in colored pencil.

DRAWING: ***Tell me about your subject matter. Have you always been interested in drawing and painting nature?***

DAVID MORRISON: I've always been interested in looking at nature. A number of years ago, as I'd go on walks with my wife I started noticing these compositions on the ground, which made beautiful shapes and patterns. We also have several sycamore trees on our property, and they constantly shed their bark. As I rode my lawn mower over the fallen debris, I kept stopping to look at how stunning the shapes and patterns were—each piece was a little landscape of the environment. They also remind me of Chinese calligraphic marks, which I love. I started to photograph them and make drawings from there.

Magnolia Tree Trunk Series, No. 3
2016, colored pencil,
37 x 23.

My drawings are trying to capture a moment of existence. I want to take a simple stick or piece of bark, which seems so ordinary, and show how captivating and complex it is. I like how when we look at nature, we can see how the environment has modified a plant and learn about its life. These fallen branches and things show a process of degeneration and a kind of rebirth, of returning back into the ecosystem.

I started drawing the bird nests when I was asked to do a series of drawings for a show titled "Elements." I'm fascinated by how the birds are architects, taking elements of sticks and yarn to create the weavings and structures. And these nests are strong where they need to be. When I touch the nests they sometimes start to fall apart, but the center always holds together.

DR: *Do you usually find your nests and branches around your home, or do you look farther afield?*

DM: Most of the work I've been doing is material from my yard. We have sycamores and a magnolia that I really love. The magnolia has been hit by lightning and has branches that have broken off, but it still has this incredible growth to it. I admire the tenacity this tree has to hang onto life and persist throughout the years.

But I'm also looking for subject matter wherever I go. For instance I did an artist residency at the Banff Centre, in Alberta. I would find these beautiful sticks with algae and insect tunnels, and I started to draw them. People would visit my studio and ask what I was working on. I'd say, "I'm drawing sticks!" At the end of the residency we had an open house and everybody saw my rendering of these common objects isolated on a pristine background. I think there was a real wow factor. And the next day there was a pile of sticks in front of my studio; everyone else had started going out and discovering these magnificent items from nature.

DR: *Tell me about the negative space in your drawings. What do you like about setting your subject against such a stark white background?*

DM: Activating the negative space is very important to me. I teach drawing and printmaking, and I'm always talking with students about negative space. In some of my earlier drawings I included an autumn background, with leaves and everything else, but I couldn't see the shape of my main subject as clearly as I wanted to. By sterilizing the object, by removing everything else around it, I could show the shape and the complexity inside the form. I try to describe every little detail. I want to show the shape and how nature made it grow the way it did. When I removed the background detail I also was able to have the shadows become an intrinsic part of the drawings.

Magnolia Branches Series, No. 2
Year TK, colored pencil, 19 x 12.

Bird Nest Series, No. 3
Year TK, colored pencil, dims TK.

DR: *How did you come to settle on colored pencil as your primary medium?*

DM: When I was a third-grader, a teacher asked me what I wanted to do with my life. I said that I had two ambitions: One was to be a professional football player; the other was to be an artist like Grant Wood. Being an artist won out.

Drawing has always been essential to me for discovering form and shape. When I was young, I'd look at artwork of others and try to draw it. I would take some famous painting and see if I could do it myself.

I came from a modest background, and pencil and paper were the materials I could always afford. Growing up I mostly did black-and-white drawings, but when I started looking at things in nature I wanted color, and I started using colored pencil. I just felt comfortable with the pencils and how I could blend the colors by layering one on top of another.

DR: *What do you use as reference during a drawing?*

DM: I use both photos and the physical objects. If you're working from nature your subject is constantly changing. I may be trying to do a leaf or stick one day, and the next day the whole color range may be different. So I like to photograph it to capture the point in time when the object spoke to me. And, in photographing it, I can set up the shadows to interact with the object. Shadows are one of the most important aspects of the work. They give it a trompe-l'oeil effect.

For a given object I might take 20 or 30 photos from different angles and with different lighting. I'll choose one, take it into Photoshop and print out three versions: a lighter value, a medium value and a darker value. I set up my drawing table with those photos and the object so that I can see them

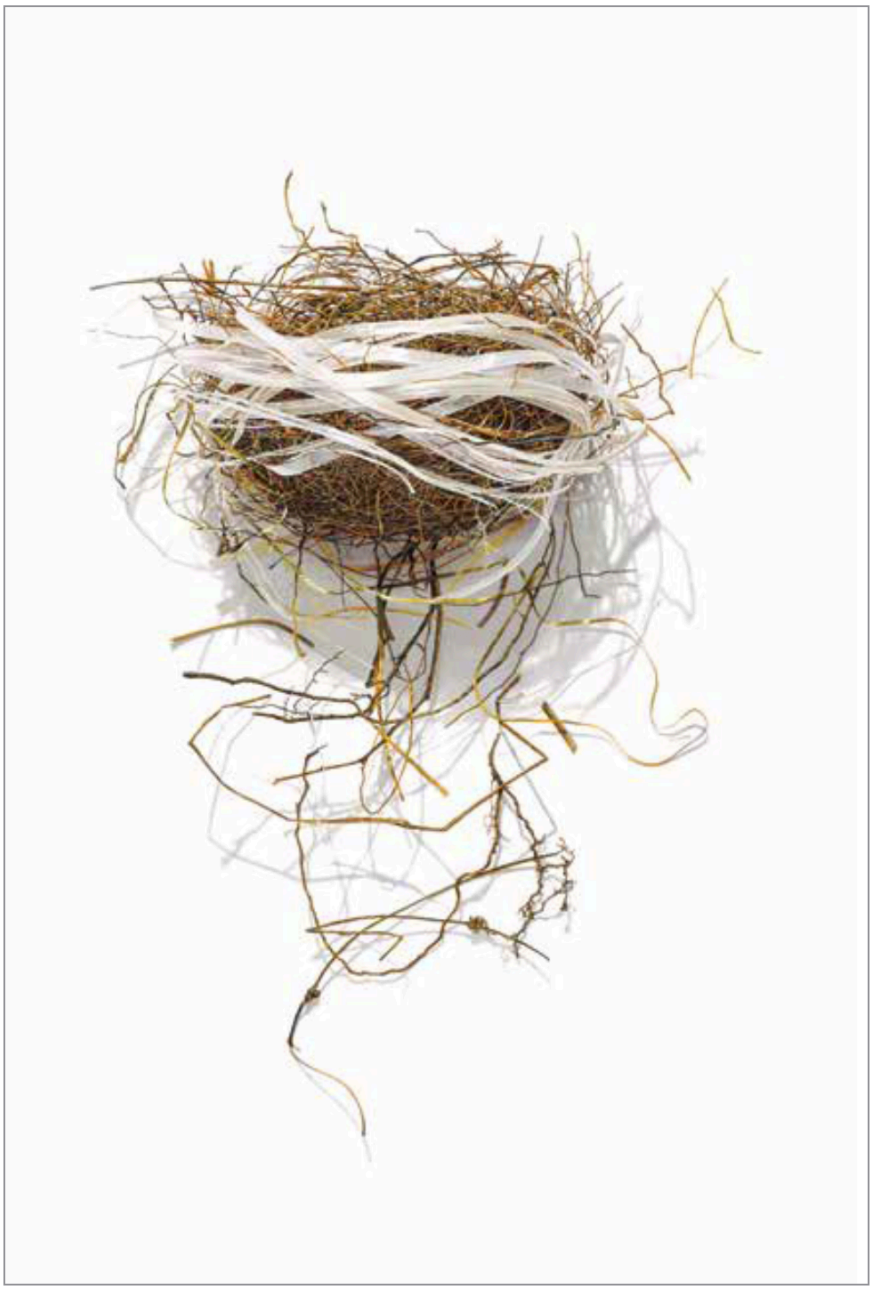
"USING COLORED PENCILS IS ALL ABOUT PRESSURE AND SENSITIVITY—LEARNING HOW TO APPLY THE PRESSURE, HOW TO BLEND, HOW MUCH OF ONE COLOR GOES ON TOP OF ANOTHER."

Stick Series, No. 1, 2015, colored pencil, 14¾ x 29½. Collection TK.

all right in front of me. As I draw, if the shadows in one image are too dark, I can refer to the lighter-value print and put more information into those areas. Or in a lighter area, I might refer to a darker shot. The actual drawing is a comprehensive version of those three photos along with looking at the actual object.

DR: *Once you've selected a reference image and printed the photos, do you make any preliminary studies, or do you dive right into working on the finished piece?*

DM: I dive right in. I start by doing a detailed contour line drawing on tracing paper. Using Saral transfer paper, I then transfer the drawing to Stonehenge 250-gsm paper.



Bird Nest Series, No. 9
Year TK, colored pencil, dims TK.

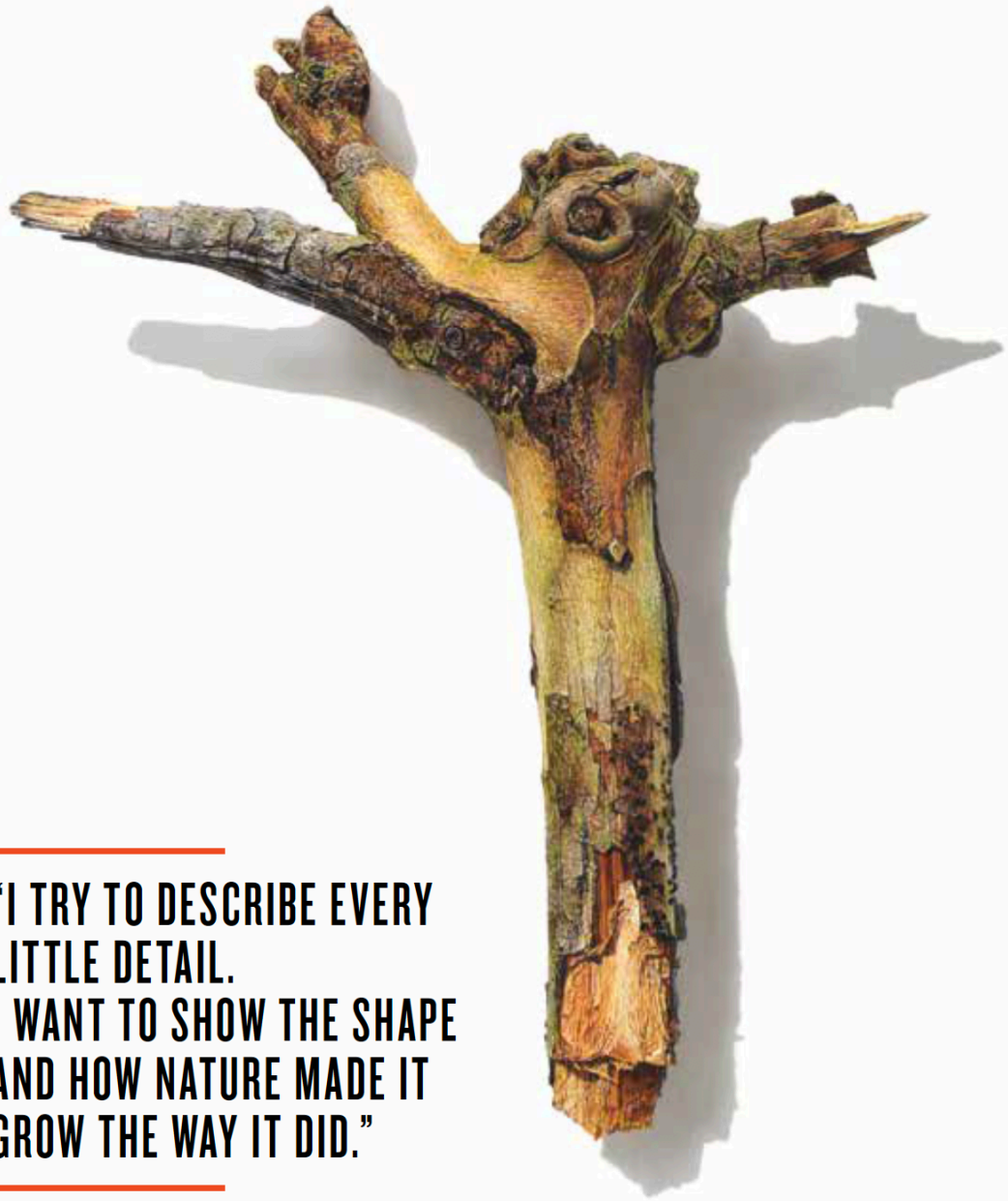
In order to keep the background clean while I work I use Badger Foto/Frisket Film, a low-tack product that airbrush artists use to stencil out spaces. I cover the paper with the frisket and trace the outline of the image on the film with a Stabilo pencil. Using an X-Acto knife I cut out the area where I will draw the image, plus an extra quarter of an inch all around the shape. This keeps the paper in the non-image area protected throughout the drawing process. I can smudge and blend as much as I want and not worry about my hand rubbing on the white background. After the drawing is done, I remove the low-tack frisket and have that pristine background.

DR: *How does the drawing progress once you've applied the frisket?*

DM: Using colored pencils is all about pressure and sensitivity—learning how to apply the pressure, how to blend, how much of one color goes on top of another. Because colored pencils are translucent, there are usually three or four layers built up to get the right color. A lot of people think I use a blending tool, but I don't. It's all about layering and using a lighter color pencil on top to do the blending.

I prefer to draw with Berol Prismacolor Premeir Pencils, which are highly pigmented and easy to blend. I start by building up the base color. Then I apply multiple layers of colors to achieve the desired tone. The next step is to use a lighter color close to the shade I'm working with and blend with that pencil. I develop the values first by layering and blending the colors to form the under drawing. Afterward I layer more colors while working on the sharpness of the details the object.

I start in an area that has both lights and darks and establish the value range there. Then I move to another section, often on the other side of the drawing. I move around the drawing so that I can create the same intensity and value throughout the entire drawing. Each square inch will usually take three to four hours to finish. I work with a headband magnifier that magnifies the area 3½ times, and my nose is four inches from the drawing.



"I TRY TO DESCRIBE EVERY LITTLE DETAIL. I WANT TO SHOW THE SHAPE AND HOW NATURE MADE IT GROW THE WAY IT DID."

Stick Series, No. 10, 2015, colored pencil, 21 x 15¼.

Drawing for me is constant learning about process and technique. With every drawing I do things a little differently. This keeps me visually excited and challenges my technical abilities. My latest research involves combining the 16th-century technology of the hand, the 17th-century technology of traditional drawing and the 21st-century technology of the printer and computer.

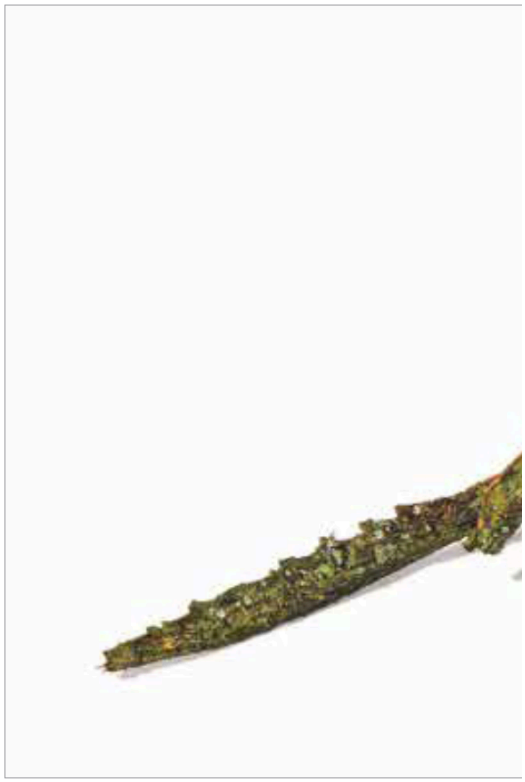
DR: *What advice can you offer to artists who are new to colored pencils?*

DM: I'd encourage them to experiment and play. Have fun with the medium. There's no right or wrong way of doing it. The thing is to be creative, have a good time and express whatever you have to say.

The Prismacolor pencils I use are really soft and beautiful. They're sensitive to pressure, and they really become an extension of your hand. If you keep the point sharp you can be very expressive. Prismacolor also makes watercolor pencils, which I've used before. With those you can get the fluidity of watercolor with the richness of color layering and the solidity of the pencil mark.

DR: *Is there any advice you find yourself constantly giving to students?*

DM: When I do critiques, I find I'm always using two words: density and tension. "Density" refers to all the research that goes into a project—researching other artists, testing papers and materials, making thumbnail sketches, et cetera. "Tension" means that little bit of uneasiness—something that makes you question the content and why the person is doing this. When there is a partnership between density and tension it's like a marriage between craftsmanship and content.



ABOVE RIGHT
Mushroom Log
Year TK, colored pencil, dims TK.

RIGHT
Paper Wasp Series, No. 1
2016, colored pencil, dims TK.

DR: *What are you working on now?*

DM: My current work is focusing on two series. My wife and I went on vacation and stayed at a cabin on a small Michigan lake. There were beautiful birch trees on the property, but the owner had had to cut down several that were falling into the lake, and they'd been chopped up for firewood. One night I was making a fire and went to pick up these logs, and I started to contemplate how striking and complex they were. I thought this wood was too remarkable to simply burn, so I photographed it instead. My current series is called "Firewood," and it's about how beautiful a piece of firewood actually is. The drawings are fairly large, and there's a lot of intricate detail. My photography skills are getting better, and I'm trying to get more detail in the photography to push the edge of how much I can actually capture.

I'm also working on a series of drawings of paper wasps' nests. They construct nests with these beautiful cone shapes, using wood that they've digested. The different wood fibers create delicate, subtle rows of grays. They have this intricate weaving pattern, and I'm trying to show how incredible the weaving actually is. It's very challenging to show that weaving, to get the shadows right and to have a three-dimensional look. It's so incredible what nature has to offer. And to capture that on a flat sheet of paper is a challenge every time. ❖

ABOUT THE ARTIST

David Morrison studied printmaking at the University of South Dakota and the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His work can be found in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, in New York; the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, both in Washington, DC; the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, in Kansas City, Missouri; and the Portland Art Museum, in Oregon. He teaches at the Herron School of Art and Design, in Indianapolis. He is represented by Garvey Simon Art Access, in New York City. For more information, visit garveysimonartaccess.com.