

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Todd McGrain

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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Google Voice [00:00:00] This call is now being recorded.

David Todd [00:00:04] Todd?

Todd McGrain [00:00:06] Hello, David.

David Todd [00:00:08] Yeah, this David. I'm fine. Thank you so much for calling.

Todd McGrain [00:00:15] Sure.

David Todd [00:00:16] It's really kind of you to take some time out to talk to me and to share some of your thoughts. I'm obliged.

Todd McGrain [00:00:30] I'm happy for the opportunity. Thanks for the interest.

David Todd [00:00:33] Sure. Well, I try to usually start these little interviews with an idea of what we're attempting to do, what the plans are and make sure that you feel comfortable with that idea. And so, if you could bear with me for a moment, I just like to kind of recite a little, almost like boilerplate, but it does lay out what our thoughts are here.

David Todd [00:01:07] So here we go. The plan we've got is to record this interview for research and education work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and then lastly, for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas here in Austin. And you would have all equal rights to use the recording as well.

David Todd [00:01:42] So that's our plan. I just want to make sure that sits well with you.

Todd McGrain [00:01:47] Sounds good. I'm in.

David Todd [00:01:50] Okay, well, great. Well, let's get started. I'll try to kind of frame where we are and when it is. And so, it is September 23rd, 2020. My name is David Todd and I'm here for the Conservation History Association of Texas. I'm in Austin, Texas, and we are conducting a phone interview with Todd McGrain, who is, I understand, based in Portland, Oregon. And he is an artist who's worked in sculpture and painting and drawing and photography and film - many media - to help raise awareness of man's impact on the world and on our fellow creatures. He's done many things, but I think one of the things that's most relevant here for our little discussion is he founded the Lost Bird Project to recognize extinct

birds, including the heath hen, the Labrador duck, Carolina parakeet, great auk, passenger pigeon, and here in Texas, Eskimo curlew.

David Todd [00:02:56] So today, I'm hoping that we can focus on discussing his efforts to create a monument to the curlew on Galveston Island.

David Todd [00:03:06] So with that little preamble, I was hoping I could ask you about your own background and how your interest in art and wildlife might have begun.

Todd McGrain [00:03:19] Yes, it's funny because, you know, the question implies a sort of, sort of choice. And I always feel a little odd in answering because to be honest, I've never felt that I had much of a choice in the matter. You know, even before I knew what art was, as a kind of profession or even as a discrete category, I knew that life was most meaningful to me when I was making something. And in all the sort of wide range of making, making art just, you know - it is far beyond the reward of any other kind of creating. I mean, I do a lot of work. I do carpentry. I do, you know, gardening and in most endeavors, and even in making art, which they all have rewards, because at the end of the day, you end up with something that you can really see progress, the results of your labors. With art, you actually out-pace your ambition. You end up with something more and better than you had intended. And that's just something I've been drawn to in my entire life. And it really never feels as though I chose that.

Todd McGrain [00:04:37] And I would say the same is true with my interest in the natural world, it's just - the forest is where I went to find solace. It's where I went to find meaning, sort of investigating the lives of animals both in the field, in observation and, you know, research at a kind of, you know, at amateur level, has just always been of real interest to me and very rewarding.

David Todd [00:05:08] Interesting. So it's, it's, it's not a - I love this idea that it's not necessarily a choice where you have discretion, that it's something that's almost hardwired, that there's a commitment that's some sort of embedded in you.

Todd McGrain [00:05:26] Yeah, I'd say it's an urge. You know, I just I just had an urge to find meaning in the world by creating, and that can be sculpture, but it can also be equally writing, drawing, photography. But the urge remains, no matter what the medium or the process is.

David Todd [00:05:51] And how did the two start to interweave, the interest in art and then the concern about wildlife?

Todd McGrain [00:06:02] Yeah. That's, that happened pretty organically as well. I had been making sculptures based on abstractions of animals for years, and just because I was so interested in the form and, and interested in capturing some of the gestures, often in an abstract way, but of a sense of natural form. And I was working on a sculpture based on a duck, a preening duck. And I can't actually remember how the book landed in my lap. But I found myself reading Chris Kokinos' book, "Hope is the Thing with Feathers". And in that book he chronicles his own, his own journey to come to grips with avian extinction. And one of the birds he focused on was Labrador duck. And as I read the chapter on the Labrador duck has sort of taken aback by the fact that the last one was seen in a park that I had spent, spent time as a child. And I found myself thinking that, how is it that I could have spent time there and have never heard of the duck and had no idea that it was the last place that the bird was ever seen in the wild?

Todd McGrain [00:07:21] So when I returned to the studio, without a great deal of intention, that duck became less abstract, more specific. I found myself reading and looking for specimens of the Labrador duck. And as I developed the form, it became clear that it belonged on the site. It belonged in Elmira, in Brand Park, so that people would know the story when they visited that place and that it would play a role in adding meaning, meaning to, to that place and bring the memory of the birds sort of to the present. And that was it. Once, even before I had cast that sculpture in bronze, I had started many of the rest of the birds that I've done in clay and starting the sort of original sketches and models and research.

David Todd [00:08:15] Well, so I guess this first idea and sculpture was the Labrador duck. How did that grow in to this larger effort of the Lost Bird Project, which comprises lots of birds that have gone extinct.

Todd McGrain [00:08:34] Right. So some of it was just my following my own interest, and interests that I actually had developed as a kid. You know, like so many young Americans, I had that Audubon's book on my lap as a kid looking through the pictures. And I did always love that image of the passenger pigeon. And the passenger pigeon narrative is so dramatic. So, you know, thought to be at one time the most numerous bird on the planet, maybe that had ever existed in those sorts of numbers. Billions of birds flying in single flocks, just kind of mind-boggling.

Todd McGrain [00:09:11] And carrying that story with me and the experience with the Labrador duck, it just seemed natural to start working my way sort of through the other extinction stories, partly because it gave me a sort of sense of purpose in the studio. But it also gave me a real sort of focused ambition of the studio - where I wanted to go, what I wanted to see, what I wanted to read, who I wanted to talk to, what collections to visit. It just became a kind of very organic chain of of interests linked, linking and, and heading toward what's now the Lost Bird Project.

David Todd [00:09:56] That's fascinating. So it helped give you some, some direction for your, your creativity. And there's so many choices in the world, I guess it's nice to have some bounds on it so you can really focus and feel like you're making progress.

Todd McGrain [00:10:16] Yeah, definitely. It's also been very rewarding that it's been well received and that there's a kind of public interest in me continuing to do the work, because you're right, there's a lot of directions artists can go. And while the urge for me to continue to make art is quite strong, it's definitely brought more into focus by the fact that I've got a bit of an audience for this work, that it's work I've been coming to be known for. And, and in a way, that, that that adds to the sort of motivation to continue the work.

David Todd [00:10:56] So, it's hard to for me to understand, I'm not an artist, but I imagine that did a lot of art is in some ways just kind of reflective on things that go on inside an artist, but a lot of it is a conversation with. art lovers, you know, the audience, the public. Is that the case with you?

Todd McGrain [00:11:21] Yes, it is. And I think it's the case for most artists. And then there's a sort of open question about who you define as your audience. You know, there's the sort of museum-going, gallery-going art-collecting world, which I've been a part of and am a part of, and continue to be interested in. You know, I'm a museum junky. And I love keeping track of what's happening in the art galleries and major art centers.

Todd McGrain [00:11:50] On the other hand, public art offers the opportunity to work with a much broader sort of audience. I mean, it's anybody who, who comes upon the sculpture, becomes, becomes audience, whether they intended it or not. And that's, find that to be very rewarding.

Todd McGrain [00:12:10] The other thing that's rewarding is the fact that this project puts me in touch with people who are enthusiasts, really completely enthusiastic about a wide range of subjects. So I find myself shoulder to shoulder with important birders out in the fields looking for, you know, rare sighting of some of the last Florida grasshopper sparrows, or in a library going over the archives of Audubon, or in the back rooms of an ornithology lab, studying specimen. It's, it's, it's just fantastic that art has brought me to all of this. And while it, while the making of art remains at the center of my interest, the fact that this project has sort of broadened the scope so much, it's, it's been very, very meaningful work for me.

David Todd [00:13:07] Well that's fascinating. So in a way, the art has kind of opened a door to interesting people to talk to, places to go, subjects to research. Sort of ingredients for a rich life.

David Todd [00:13:20] Well, so you clearly have done lots of work, in lots of parts of the world. I think where, where my little project crossed paths with yours was on Galveston Island and the sculpture that you recently put out there for the Eskimo curlew's memory. And I was hoping that you might tell us a little bit about that aspect of the Lost Bird Project. And maybe a good place to start would be just how did the curlew become extinct or maybe become so highly endangered that, you know, it's unclear if they still remain.

Todd McGrain [00:14:05] Yeah, that, you know, the Eskimo curlew in some way, in some ways touches lots of the contemporary extinction forces. The habitat loss, so that's the conversion of habitat into agriculture, and its effect on on the broader ecology. So the great diminishment of the grasshoppers that the Eskimo curlews fed on had certainly hurt the Eskimo curlew numbers and then, you know, there's hunting, both sport hunting and market hunting, which is, you know, hunting to be, to be sold. And, you know, at the end of the 19th century, wild meat was just, you know, use the word, "harvested". It was just being harvested at enormous numbers.

Todd McGrain [00:14:59] And many species that are very numerous, it turns out they actually need to be numerous. You say, oh, there's so many cod, there's so many Eskimo curlew, there's so many passenger pigeons, how could we ever diminish this population? Well, their, their sort of life cycle in many ways, demands having large numbers. You know, Eskimo curlews had this enormous migration, very interesting elliptical migration across the Atlantic and then up North America, up from South America through, through North America. And it was sort of perilous as far as the number of places that the bird could be hunted and would be, would be taken for food.

Todd McGrain [00:15:47] And ultimately, it's that if that destruction of habitat, that transfer of the broader ecosystem and then just, you know, unrestrained hunting led, led to the demise of the Eskimo curlew.

Todd McGrain [00:16:05] And you're right. They're still, you know, it's still not listed as extinct. And there's a number of reasons for that. One is, I think people, people hope that a species can hang in there and people continue to look for Eskimo curlew and hope that maybe

one will be spotted and every once in a while, there is a report that maybe one has been seen. And while those are very sort of hopeful stories, the truth is the kind of culture of this species is gone and and won't come back. And, and that is, I think, a permanent fact.

David Todd [00:16:49] You know, it's interesting to me that. You know, whether the curlew is extinct or just highly, critically endangered in 2020, that it, like a lot of birds, was kind of on the threshold, that it was in this waiting room for extinction for scores of years. I've read stuff, you know, it was considered a goner in the turn of the last century. And I was wondering if that kind of message is something that resonates with you when we've got so many birds that are declining now, but aren't extinct, but there in that same kind of twilight.

Todd McGrain [00:17:34] So, yeah, I you know, the surveys are not good. The number of birds that are at risk is really high. And I think we are, you know, in fact, facing a kind of extinction crisis. And it's not a crisis that, you know, that's part of any kind of natural evolution. And it really is the result of human engagement with the earth that so many species are in trouble. And it's a huge problem, of course, for the species, but for us as well.

Todd McGrain [00:18:05] And not just sort of poetically but you know, the canary in the coal mine is that, it's a real story. You know, we just finished these horrible fires in the Pacific Northwest, where I live, and in California, and the smoke is causing birds to drop from the sky in terrible numbers. Well, what does that tell you about the air quality? You know, we're breathing that same air and we really depend on the natural environment. And I think, I think we tend to forget that everything comes from the earth. We live in a society that is so constructed, seems so manufactured. We forget that the root of everything we have is Earth. And, we, we transform the resources of Earth so much that we can sometimes forget that. And that forgetting we also forget that how integrated the natural world is, how important it is to remember and nurture the wide range of species and the interrelatedness, because the dependence of one species on another is, is really strong and we are one of those species.

David Todd [00:19:24] You know, something else that I think is interesting about, and "interesting" seems so clinical, but it's, it's intriguing that the curlew, like a lot of creatures, you know, was, suffered a lot from people just killing them outright, intentionally. But then this sort of idea of collateral damage, of, you know, where there's a, there's a kind of ultimate cause that you go out and, you know, plow the prairies, and that kills the grasshoppers, and the grasshoppers aren't there for the curlews, and so their migration, nutrition is screwed up. And then eventually they say, but it's the proximate and ultimate cause are just so separate, that, you know, it seems like a pretty bloodless way for a creature to go extinct. You know what I mean, there's not that kind of targeted effort to extinguish them.

Todd McGrain [00:20:28] Oh, yeah.

David Todd [00:20:29] And among all the creatures that you've studied and sculpted, you know, if that makes a difference or not, you know, whether it goes extinct because people just garrotted them or if they, you know, just this side effect.

Todd McGrain [00:20:49] Right. That's, that's a fact. And it's more of a fact now that I think it's ever been because, you know, climate change, in general, in the broadest sense, is a huge threat to bird species. We see it in specific examples where a bird is out of sync with its food source. That is, that the insects are hatching in advance of the bird arriving or vice versa, and it puts migratory birds at great risk. We see birds that are losing habitat because they require a certain temperature and that temperature is rising up a mountainside. And soon the top of

the mountain is no longer the temperature that's appropriate for that species. There's just a lot of difficulty to, to sort of get your head around the results of climate change in the broad sense.

Todd McGrain [00:21:44] But to me, that makes the telling of stories of extinction even more important because, you know, once you know the sort of connectedness, it's no longer collateral damage. So if you're converting a wetland and you know that it's going to disturb a habitat of an endangered species, all of a sudden that that kind of abstract change of the environment becomes very literally a cause of difficulty for a species. And the difference is in the knowing. So, you know, I really think that there is something true about, about, you know, you don't really judge people from the past for behaving in the ways that seemed appropriate in the past. And there may have been facts that were missing in those decisions. The importance is to put the facts on the table and make sure that those facts direct our behavior. And once you know, you can't unknow. And there's a sort of great clarity in that. So, you know, gardeners who are planting the appropriate flowers for hummingbirds. It not only helps the hummingbirds, it helps bring focus to the gardening, and it brings great meaning to the gardener. And that kind of, that sort of understanding requires information, it requires, in, in the case of extinction, it requires stories because these are things that are lost. So we have to keep telling the story and not dwell on it in a negative way, but tell, tell it for, for what a marvelous story it is, so that we appreciate what we've lost. And, you know, the hope, of course, would be then we reflect on what we still have and, you know, try to nurture it. And that's, you know, in a way, that's the hope that's behind the Lost Bird Project.

David Todd [00:23:58] You know, one thing I've found really fascinating about the Lost Bird Project is that you work really hard to put these extinctions in context by siting them in a particular place where that bird was last seen. And I was curious if you could tell me a little bit about, you know, that general kind of approach, how you came to it, but also how that might have affected Galveston's choice as a place to memorialize the Eskimo curlew, which, you know, as you pointed out, migrated all over the world.

Todd McGrain [00:24:39] All right. Yeah, placing the sculptures in the places with direct connection to, to extinction is important to me because it, it just adds another layer of meaning to the work. And that added layer offers more participation in a way. The, the Galveston Island story is a good, is a good one.

Todd McGrain [00:25:12] You know, when I'm out looking, when I'm not looking for a place to put a memorial to a lost bird, I want to know that it had some, in some cases, it's truly the spot where the last bird was seen in the wild. That's remarkable when we know it.

Todd McGrain [00:25:29] Also, a place where it can add meaning to the landscape. So it can't be so remote that no one will ever see it. It needs to be a place that people will come upon the sculptures.

Todd McGrain [00:25:41] And then the third one is that it's in a kind of place where some level of interpretation can happen, that there's, that there are people who can extend the meaning of the sculpture. So in the case of Galveston, you know, it was it was Julie Anne Brown who was the director of the Galveston Island Nature Tourism Council.

Todd McGrain [00:26:03] She, she - it's maybe been 10 years now - she saw a video that I put out where I was beginning a sketch and some modeling of the Eskimo curlew. She reached out and said, well, if you're going to do that, you need to know about Galveston Island. And that

was the beginning of thinking about Galveston Island as a, as a site for the memorial. And it's simply someone reaching out: that the interest is a good start. Because in my world, partnerships are absolutely crucial. I need partnerships to help get approval for siting the sculptures. I need partnerships to pay to get the sculptures cast in bronze and installed. I need partners often to rally the community behind the project, which is connected to both funding, but also approvals and just a general kind of acceptance.

Todd McGrain [00:27:01] And that combination of, of a site that is historically relevant, there's some enthusiasm for the project, and then the possibility of, of having the story of the birds told, even in, you know, even in my absence, certainly, and once the sculpture has been there for a long time. In Galveston, we got it in the state park. And part of that negotiation and partnership with the state park was the fact that they have interpreters who are going to include the story of the Eskimo curlew on every tour they give of that park. And for me, that's just a huge plus. It's, it's you know, people, people learn and experience in different ways. Some people will be moved by the sculpture because they love form. They love sculpture. They love expressive art. Some people will be moved by information that they'll get from a guide, one of the park officials. Some people, it's story and just seeing the sculpture will be a curiosity and they'll want to read more about about the species. And it's nice to have a project that allows such a breadth of sort of doors in because whatever the door is that you enter.

Todd McGrain [00:28:17] Excuse me. Excuse me.

Todd McGrain [00:28:24] Whatever door you enter, that's sort of the welcoming door, once you're in, you don't know what's going to happen. Pretty soon you start thinking, well, maybe I am an art lover. Maybe I should read more about natural history, or maybe I should do more tours in the parks in my region. It's really rewarding to feel that this project can be a part of that kind of engagement.

David Todd [00:28:52] That's great. It's fascinating how these kind of inert pieces of bronze can, can have this kind of magical effect and open, you know, new realities to people, whether it's, you know, books or, or people or interests. That's a powerful thing.

David Todd [00:29:16] You know, one of the things that struck me about the place that you chose is that it is indeed where the curlew was, was witnessed, you know, in the last decade of its life, of its existence. And I was curious if you ran across any of the stories of people who had seen it, photographed it, videotaped it? Oh, I guess made movies at the time.

Todd McGrain [00:29:45] Right. Yeah. No, I had a wonderful afternoon with Victor Emanuel, who was one of the folks who in 1962 saw an Eskimo curlew there on Galveston Island. And, you know, it's nice to meet someone who had that rare experience, you know, you can, you can sort of feel how important it is to them. And also for me, it's sort of meeting of someone and having them say, I once saw this bird that's now gone, it also puts a timeframe to it that's so personal. You know, Victor is a bit older than I am, and I didn't get to see that bird. And in generations to come, no one will have had first-hand experience. So it makes me feel very privileged to meet someone like Victor. I also had the great privilege of going birding with him, which was, you know, wonderful. And also, you know, a little funny because, you know, at the end of the day, you compare your lists and, you know, I've got 12 birds I was excited about seeing, and he's got 55. So those, those numbers may not be exact. It may have been even more extreme than that. He was seeing more birds faster and quicker and... Amazing, amazing, remarkable, remarkable birder and guide and storyteller. And it was a real pleasure to meet him.

David Todd [00:31:17] I see, and I love the way you, you put it, that it makes it, this species, in its thousands of years of existence in its millions of individual creatures, it must make it very personal to see someone who saw it and could describe it, and, you know, experienced it.

David Todd [00:31:43] So, another question, if you don't mind. Once you decided that Eskimo curlew was, was a, you know, a creature you wanted to describe in a sculpture, can you tell us a little bit about how you designed it and made it?

Todd McGrain [00:32:05] Yeah. So I always I start by going around and looking at as many specimens as I can find. The, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, I've collaborated with them quite a bit, and they were generous enough to let me see their, their, they have a very beautiful mounted Eskimo curlew that I, I got a lot of measurements from, studied, photographed, drew from. And from there, I make a small clay model. In the case of the Eskimo curlew, I made a model about eight and a half inches tall in a pose. And so I'm working in clay so I can adjust the pose. And the pose I'm looking for is, one, I want people to recognize what the species is. So it needs to be proportionally and expressively based on kind of iconic position of the bird.

Todd McGrain [00:33:05] But then I work, you know, tirelessly to get in that gesture, something that we're physically sympathetic to. You know, when you, when you look at your, you know, your loved dog and tilt your head and the dog tilts his head, you feel a kind of sympathy to that look of inquiry and acknowledgment that you're both sentient beings. And that, that's something I want this sculpture to have. I want them to be familiar physically. So you feel you're in the presence of, of a kind of sympathetic physical force, energy.

Todd McGrain [00:33:46] Then there's scale. I go from that small model and I'm feeling satisfied with it, I start to scale it up. And in this case, I scaled up to about four feet tall and made modifications and then I scaled up to a full, full height of about six foot three. And at that scale, for this sort of long legged bird, gives the, gives the sculpture, again, a kind of physical sympathy to humans - it's a sort of human scale.

Todd McGrain [00:34:15] And then, the other aspects that people are often curious about, they're, they're quite smooth. I work really hard on the surface and I, there's very little detail per se, there's a general silhouette, general shape of the bird. But there are no feathers, no eyes, no toenails or scales. They, to me, that smooth surface conjures a kind of tactility, something you want to reach out and touch, and also the effects of time and memory on the past. So in a way, not in a very literal sense, but in a kind of expressive sense, they have a bit of the quality of a beach stone that just feels good in the hand. You know, you pick it up, it's the softness of the shape. And, you know, time has taken off the bumps and the pores of it and softened it. And that's, that's the quality I want the sculptures to have. So they're all, they're all pretty, pretty minimal in their detail. But hopefully that helps with the general expression of loss and, and invites touch, which I think is the way the past can become very much present.

David Todd [00:35:42] Yeah. You know, one thing that struck me when I was reading about your work is that I think you had one opportunity to look at the Audubon Birds of America portfolio. And I think you described seeing these ghost images, mirror shadows, almost like a silhouette, from the pages of the portfolio of pressing against the back of the opposite page. Is that accurate, and that might have been a source of inspiration for you?

Todd McGrain [00:36:17] Yeah. They were amazing. The ghost image that the ink, the ink of the image had bled very subtly on the back of the page, on the next page. So when you looked

at the book, you could see the brilliant, still quite brilliant ink from the hand-colored Audubon print. And then on the facing page was this kind of ghost image and yeah, they were really haunting. But they were, they were so beautiful, you know, a bit like like seeing negatives, old negative films. That kind of mystery.

Todd McGrain [00:36:50] And yeah, this, this, always looking for metaphors around memory is important to me, and that's why. How, how can like a physical, physical erosion, you know, the beat back to the beach stone, how can a form that's been affected by time, that's, that's similar in some poetic way about how memory is affected by time. And I think we do the same thing with what we remember. We, we, we cling to the feelings of it. We cling to the general sense of the place, even though some of the details kind of wash away. And those, those prints had that quality. They just, they just felt like they were the, the page sort of remembering the image.

Todd McGrain [00:37:42] There's another fine example of that that I found so beautiful. I worked as an artist in residence in Rome, Italy, which has an ancient collection in the back room. There were these mounting boards that had once held butterflies. But over, you know, hundreds of years, the butterflies had disintegrated and turned into dust and fluffed away. And all that was left was a sheet of cloth with pens in it. And these absolutely gorgeous imprints of where the butterflies once were. And again, I thought I saw that and thought that is just the most beautiful, poetic physical metaphor for memory and time.

Todd McGrain [00:38:24] And then I'm struck by that often, you know, the natural world, there's so much growth and erosion in the forms. In geology, you can read the story of the making of the earth, if you meant to look at the geological outcroppings correctly. And, you know, every burl on a tree is just a beautiful scar of a lost limb and persistent, persistent memory of it, in a tree sense. I know that this maybe sounds a little, you know, overly poetic, but it is how I tend to see the world.

David Todd [00:39:07] Well, it's, it's a enormous challenge, what you're trying to do, to capture something that's gone, I mean, it seems like you're, you're not only trying to kind of illustrate a bird, but you're also trying to describe this whole idea of memory and loss and erasure.

David Todd [00:39:34] And, you know, one thing that struck me. I know this is part of your thinking that went into it, but, you know, you are, I think, trying to describe not just a single, particular Eskimo curlew, but you are trying to represent a whole species. And I guess if you did that, all the individual markings are going to kind of get lost in the millions of birds that it represents. Anything related to that?

Todd McGrain [00:40:10] Yeah, I mean, it's about trying to find kind of essential, you know, what's the essential, what's, what's the sort of the essential form of the memory of this bird? And that's what I hope the sculptures have.

David Todd [00:40:30] You know, there, there's just so much wonderful kind of metaphor, to what you have been doing. But then there's also the kind of, you know, day-to-day, nuts-and-bolts of making this happen, because it's not a cheap or simple thing you've done. I mean, these to, to put a sculpture out there, and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you, in the case of the curlew, raised the money and found that sort of support. I think you mentioned Julie Ann Brown and the Galveston Island Nature Tourism Council. But can you tell me more about just how you made this come to fruition?

Todd McGrain [00:41:22] Yeah, let me let me first start by saying that, you know, I, I, I think I grew up with a general distrust of commerce in a way. I'm not sure why. But even as a kid, I remember being at a garage sale and someone would come up and want something of mine and they'd say, how much do you want for it and I'd just say, "just take it like, you know, you can just have it if you want it." You wanting it is enough for me.

Todd McGrain [00:41:52] And as an artist, I tried to keep, you know, commerce away from it for a long time. I've come to realize, through people like Julie Ann Brown, who is a fantastic community builder. I began to realize that, that, you know, donating toward a project of this sort can actually build community and helps people feel invested both literally and sort of spiritually in the project. And then it helps them with a sense of ownership as well. You see something, you say I helped make that happen. So I shifted a bit and I've begun to realize the value of fundraising. That said, I don't do much of the direct sort of "ask". My job in fundraising is mostly to speak to the projects. So I, I speak as enthusiastically and as movingly as I can about what it is I hope to do. And then I rely on partners, normally in the region where the memorial is going to go to do the direct fundraising.

Todd McGrain [00:42:55] And in the case of Galveston Island, you know, it was led by the Galveston Island Nature Tourism Council. And we had a couple of events that I came and spoke and they were fantastic. It's just, it just felt like Julie Ann Brown knew how to get the right people in that room. And they weren't just, you know, the people she thought would be a good hit for funding, they were the people who she felt would believe in the project and want to share in making it happen. It was a very rewarding experience, I think much to the surprise of a lot of the people, including Julie Anne. I think she was surprised how much fun it was to raise money for this project. You know, "fun" may not be the right word, but I think it was very rewarding.

Todd McGrain [00:43:46] And the other thing is, I, so I work in in the commercial art world. And then I have this not-for-profit, The Lost Bird Project, that I do these projects for. And you know, the art market is a crazy world where the prices of things can be just outlandish. I mean, even sometimes in the case of my own work, I'll think, wow, that's a lot of money. I do these projects, the memorials, under the arm of the non-profit so that I can, for one, donate. Donors can get a write-off, which is nice. Two, it, the non-profit aspect of it expresses my interest in the project, which is not about monetary gain. And then it allows me to keep the actual cost of getting it done way lower than sort of market value for sculptures of this size and scale. And from an artist with my reputation, you know, we get these things done at a pretty reasonable cost, relative to some of the crazy prices that you see in the art world, which are arguably are unsustainable. But people do pay them. It's really sometimes eye-rolling to me just how much money is spent on art. So we, we put together budgets that are much more, you know, how much is it going to cost to make it? How much does it cost to install it? How much is it going to cost to maintain it? Get a kind of bare-bones number. And I've been surprised and, and happily surprised, at some, at the sort of success with the fundraising to make these projects happen. And again, it's really about partnerships. And I can't say enough about the Galveston Island Nature Tourism Council. They just, they made this thing happen. And I hope it it serves them as well as the project has served me. It's been a, really a joy to work on.

David Todd [00:45:44] I gather that you were involved with picking the site. And I think you mentioned that, you know, a lot of that had to do with this sort of exposure that it would have, and that kind of interpretation. I'm curious when the, the, the sculpture was installed, can you

give us any sense of how it sort of fit into the landscape there? You know, how it spoke not to visitor so much, but how it kind of related to that marsh / shore / ocean / bay environment.

Todd McGrain [00:46:25] All right. Yeah. It's, it's, I think it's beautifully situated. You can you know, I stood in the spot where it now stands and, you know, you can look off and imagine it being seen from a boat. There's, there's a beautiful pedestrian bridge that leads towards it. It's a bit of a destination, which is nice in this case, because you have to, you have to put in a little that effort to get to it. So if you're intentionally going to get there, you've got to decide you're going to go for a hike. You're going to do a little bit of, you know, invest a little bit of time to get out there and I think that's nice.

Todd McGrain [00:46:58] And then its, its, its position also, I think, you can see it from a distance and the scale is quite interesting from a distance. You, you wouldn't know how large it is. You know, that sort of prairie, dry prairie, or marshy landscape doesn't have a lot of landmarks that help you understand scale. So I think, I think walking upon the, coming upon it, will be a surprise to people. The issue of scale, like when you get close to it, it's quite large. And you see it in silhouette. It's, it's, it's, I think it's its effect will be a bit mysterious. And what is, what is this and why it is, why is it here. And beyond that, it's also just an absolutely gorgeous park and, and adding, adding, you know, a destination to that park and luring as many people as possible out to that place. I just think everyone will find that very rewarding, worth the search.

David Todd [00:48:17] So. You talked about things being worth the search and I guess a lot of this is making things significant, beyond the wax and the clay and the bronze that goes into it. That it has a life beyond its physical ingredients.

David Todd [00:48:39] And I was wondering if you could just, as we kind of close up our time together, talk a little about the nature of trying to create a memorial. You know, where you're you trying to connect with, you know, people's sense of things, their imagination, their memory, their understanding of the world around them. And would you have any comments about how, you know, how you hope these memorials, including the Eskimo curlew sculpture, fit in?

Todd McGrain [00:49:13] Yeah, I think, you know, we've, we've thought of the memorials as bringing the past to the present, something from the past that we respect and admire. So often those are related to war or loss, the loss of life in war. At its worst, memorials are about power. That just someone who simply had the funds to aggrandize their place, in time in history. At their best, they remind us of, of what, of what we are culturally, historically. And like any art, I think the ultimate judge of, of the quality of work is, are, are the people who experience the work changed in some way? And that change can be minor. But somehow for art to be truly meaningful, it needs to be, I mean, I think I think we can say that we're, we're the result of our experiences. But not all experiences are the same. And the hope is that art is an extraordinary experience that the experience of art is one that is beyond the kind of normal experiences of our day and that it adds something to us that changes the way we see and understand the world. That's certainly been the case for me in my entire life. Seeing art, you know - I see people racing through museums and I can't understand it because I love them so much that I look at things. You know, I see something in a painting. I see something in the sculpture that I will then see out in the world and be affected by it. I mean, the colors of a, of an Impressionist painting has changed the way I see color in the world. I won't look at sunflowers the same way having seen Van Gogh's sunflowers. There's, there's something about art leading the way, we learn to see and experience the world. And I would hope that

the Lost Bird Project memorials will play that role, and that's a role that monuments can play - that there are places of reflection and particular reflection, I'm hoping to instigate and nurture is kind of kindness for our natural world caused by the reflecting on what we have lost. And I hope with the help of my collaborating partners, good storytellers, the ornithologists, hikers, anybody that tells the story of these birds, that these will be both literal and symbolic touchstones for keeping the memory of our lost species as part of our natural history, which is to say, part of our living culture.

David Todd [00:52:41] You are an eloquent guy. And you're a generous one. Thanks for spending time with us. I just had a one closing question: is there anything you'd like to add?

Todd McGrain [00:52:59] No, I, I think I've said a lot. Thank you very much for the compliment and thank you so much for the interest in the work and for the work that you're doing.

Todd McGrain [00:53:10] I think, I think it seems what you're doing is very meaningful for, for the history of your region. And, you know, I'm exactly the kind of person that ends up diving into archives to find more about a place and time. So thanks to you for putting in the hard work to do that.

David Todd [00:53:32] Well thank you. That's kind of you. Well, I wish you all the best for your, the next chapter in the Project, and I will follow you and see if I can learn more. So, but thanks again for your time today and I wish you the best days in the days and years to come.

Todd McGrain [00:53:53] All right. Thank you, sir.

David Todd [00:53:55] All right. Thanks, Todd. Bye now.

Todd McGrain [00:53:56] Take care.