

PROFILE

The Artist as Iguanaphile: A Profile of Joel Friesch

Robert W. Henderson

Section of Vertebrate Zoology, Milwaukee Public Museum
800 W. Wells Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53233, USA

I'm not sure how many iguanaphiles can boast of having fabricated the suit for RoboCop II, or being the visual effects supervisor on Cat Woman, but Joel Friesch can (not that he boasts — he doesn't — and, yes, he met Halle Barry).

I've known Joel Friesch for 20 years, and his artistic talents continue to amaze me. Our paths first crossed in the Milwaukee Public Museum in the mid-1980s when Joel, as a fine arts (painting and drawing) student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, was hired to model and paint amphibians and reptiles for a permanent exhibit on rainforest ecology. As it was my responsibility to oversee all aspects of the exhibit concerned with herps, Joel and I had many interactions. During the multi-year production of the exhibit, Joel intimated that his supervisor

wanted him to enhance the color of some of the critters to make them more eye-catching. He told me he'd only paint them the way I wanted them done. I was, of course, impressed with his devotion to accuracy.

We had some live giant Hispaniolan treefrogs, *Osteopilus vastus*, for the exhibit. On his own time, Joel carved and accurately painted a model of this neat frog about 50 times life size. On the night the exhibit opened, he had fastened it to a wall of the exhibit and we enjoyed watching visitors' surprise as they



Joel painting "Mugwumps" for David Cronenberg's movie *Naked Lunch* at Chris Walas, Inc. in the 1990s.



Joel clear-coating a model of a Burmese Python (*Python molurus molurus*) modified and painted to look like a Green Anaconda (*Eunectes murinus*) at the Milwaukee Public Museum in 1987. Photograph courtesy of the Milwaukee Public Museum.



Joel painting reptiles with Jerry Persick for a rainforest exhibit at Milwaukee Public Museum in 1987. Photograph courtesy of the Milwaukee Public Museum.



Treefrog (*Osteopilus vastus*) sculpture (above Joel), circa 1986-7. This sculpture now hangs in the home of the author. Photographer unknown.

realized what they were seeing (that giant frog now resides in my living room, a gift from my wife who bought it from Joel). Joel came to the museum already enamored of iguanas. He had two between 2nd and 5th grades, but was forced to donate them to the Milwaukee Zoo because his parents felt they were “too big” for him. Because we had to purchase some live Green Iguanas in order to make detailed models for the exhibit, Joel asked me to order two juveniles for him. I don’t think Joel has been without iguanas since.

I knew Joel’s goal was to work in the movie industry as a special effects artist. I had hoped he’d stay at the museum, but showbiz beckoned; shortly after graduation, he headed for California. Not surprisingly, success in the movies came fairly quickly. He free-lanced for Disney and other studios before assuming a permanent position with Tippett Studios in San Francisco. As luck would have it, just as Joel was beginning his career in the movies, the movies were in the process of going

almost exclusively to computer-generated special effects. Joel learned the new techniques on-the-job, and he has graduated from an animatronics technician on “Arachnophobia” to visual effects supervisor on the forthcoming “Charlotte’s Web.” Between his spider pics, Joel has worked on “Naked Lunch,” “Nightmare Before Christmas,” “Mission to Mars,” “Cat Woman,” and “Hellboy,” to name a few. He also has done lots of commercials, winning a couple of Clio awards in the process.

A few years into his “Hollywood” career, Joel called and asked when I was heading out for my next field trip and could he come along. I was heavily involved with treeboas (*Corallus*) by then, and making regular trips to Grenada. In 1993, Joel made the first of his treeboa trips. I knew he’d be low maintenance in the field: hardworking and no complaining. However, he went a step farther by bringing along a supply of Pop Tarts for breakfast to offset the monotonous menu of peanut butter sandwiches. Joel was fearless in the field: he’d climb trees I was no longer agile enough to ascend myself, and he always wanted to capture the biggest treeboas. I can recall his first shot at capturing a large female (uh, treeboa). It was perched low under some shrubbery and Joel had to stoop low to get a good angle on it. Once you commit to grabbing one, you can’t hesitate ‘cause they’ll nail you. Joel hesitated and Joel got nailed. He yelped and bled, but he



Joel participated in the 2000 Shedd Aquarium trip to Andros Island, Bahamas; shown here with the first capture of an Andros Iguana (*Cyclura cyblura cyblura*).



A portrait of “Billy” (Grand Cayman Blue Iguana, *Cyclura lewisi*) as Joel first saw him at the breeding and headstarting facility on Grand Cayman.



CATHY FRIESCH

Joel and his son Mason in the “RWH Cyclurium” holding “Andros” (Rhinoceros Iguana, *Cyclura cornuta*) with “Duke” (Grand Cayman Blue and Cuban Iguana hybrid, *Cyclura lewisi x nubila*) on the other side of the screened cage.



JOHN BINNS

Joel was an IRCF team member refurbishing the Anegada Head-starting Facility in 2001.



JOHN BINNS

Joel receiving hugs from “Dino,” John and Sandy Binns’s Black Throat Monitor (*Varanus albigularis ionides*) in 2001.

caught the snake. Subsequently, Joel made a second trip to Grenada and one to Trinidad, always in pursuit of treeboas.

Despite my best efforts to keep Joel focused on snakes, his early fascination with iguanas would not go away. He counts seeing a male *Iguana iguana* sprawled on a branch high above a river in Belize among his fondest memories. Working with Chuck Knapp, his first sighting of *Cyclura* on Andros was another high point, along with seeing Billy, the Blue Iguana (*C. lewisi*) emerging from the brush to greet him for the first time on Grand Cayman. Despite being ultra-sensitive to poisonwood (Joel’s wife Cathy is a nurse, and, when she picked him up at the airport after his return from Andros, the first stop was the emergency room at the local hospital.), he has returned to the Bahamas to be of assistance as needed.

Joel has been, and continues to be, active in iguana conservation. He designed: the old and new logos for the International Iguana Foundation, signs for protection of *Iguana delicatissima* on St. Eustatius, a Hurricane Ivan t-shirt for Grand Cayman Iguana promotion, *Cyclura pinguis* art for the San Diego Zoo, the logo for the Turtle Survival Alliance, the Dr. Frederic Frye Veterinary Medicine Award, the Utila Iguana t-shirt, header art for the Anegada Wildlife News, a t-shirt for conservation of iguanas on Saba, a “Save the Andros Iguana” poster for Chuck Knapp that he distributes on Andros, and cartoons for the Blue Iguana Recovery Program. One of Joel’s most recent artistic endeavors is the design for the King Blue Bobblehead figure, the head of which is based on his meticulously detailed Blue Iguana bust. He also helped build head-start cages for *Cyclura* on Anegada.

For his own enjoyment, Joel has created wonderfully detailed sculptures of various species of iguanas (as well as the occasional monitor, tortoise, and snake). These are scale-for-scale representations and each is hand-painted. The elegant sculptures can be viewed at www.scaledArt.com. I’m the proud owner of two.

Attached to their home in San Rafael is the RWH Cyclurium, a walk-in habitat for a male *Cyclura cornuta* and a male *C. lewisi x C. caymanensis* hybrid (the two guys are separated by a wooden door). Joel and his 4-year-old son Mason check on the iguanas every morning; with Joel’s enthusiasm for iguanas, I’m sure it’s just a matter of time before baby daughter Avery makes it a threesome.

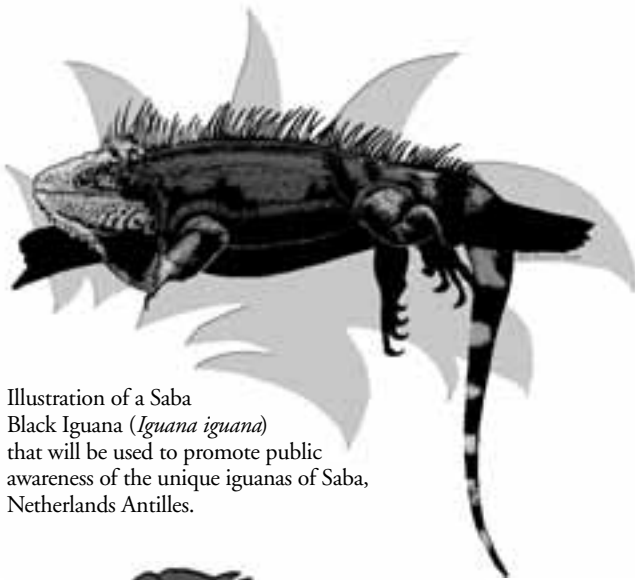


Illustration of a Saba Black Iguana (*Iguana iguana*) that will be used to promote public awareness of the unique iguanas of Saba, Netherlands Antilles.



Illustration of a Stout Iguana, *Cyclura pinguis*.



Illustration of a Rhinoceros Iguana, *Cyclura cornuta*.



An illustration of an Utila Iguana (*Ctenosaura bakeri*) that Joel created to support the Conservation Program for the Utila Iguana.



MARINA BEHRNDT, TEACHER

At an IRCF-sponsored educational event at Marin Formative, San Rafael, in April 2005, Joel displays “Duke,” his Grand Cayman Blue and Cuban Iguana hybrid (*Cyclura lewisi* x *nubila*) to young attendees.



JOEL FRIESCH

Cyclura lewisi population survey in June 2002 (from left: Joe Wasilewski, Alberto Jaramillo, Fred Burton, and Joel Friesch).



JOHN BINNS

Joel arriving in Tortola, BVI in 2001 waiting to clear immigration on the way to Anegada.