

how annette got her groove back

(How Black Heart's Predator Helped a Post-Divorce Garage Kit Newbie Rediscover Herself and Her Confidence) by Annette Smith



Annette Smith of Eugene, Oregon was a hairdresser for 20 years and is presently working toward her Bachelor's of Science degree in medical laboratory technology. In October of 2010, she ordered Black Heart's 1:1 scale Elder Predator kit. She had never ordered from us and when she inquired about what paints and adhesives to use, we realized that she had never built or painted a model kit. Her very first garage kit would be a 1:1 scale Predator head, the most expensive kit in the Black Heart line. With 3 main parts (the head and the dreads), 6 teeth, 2 mandibles and 22 quills, our Predator had the most parts and would require the most involved paint job (textures, dreads, jewelry, teeth, mandibles, detail on the inside of the mouth) of all the BH kits. Concerned that she might be in over her head, we communicated with Annette about the buildup, materials, brands of paint, colors and techniques. We lost contact for a while in early 2011 when some personal challenges forced Annette to back-burner her Predator.

This article chronicles her 10-month odyssey to recover her mojo. Presented here are pertinent parts of the journal she kept as we collaborated on her Predator wall-hanger build-up. She did all the work with spray paint, hand brushing, dry-brushing and pastel chalks; and most of her photos were shot with her cell phone. Black Heart provided some tips and advice here and there to make sure she had fun and to ensure that her money was well-spent. The lady is now hooked on garage kits.

Prologue

Halloween 2010 was coming and I was thinking about what I was going to be for our costume party at work. I instantly thought of the scariest monster I've ever seen, the one that, if I were in the woods and saw it camouflaged in the trees, I'd collapse and die. I'm talking about the Predator. I started searching the internet for Predator masks and costumes and came to a site selling doll-sized Predators that were completely hand-painted. Very impressive. I scrolled to the bottom of that page and starting going through a bunch of the links there when I came to the link for Black Heart. I clicked on it, scrolled through the Gallery page, and came across a life-sized model kit of a Predator head. It was designed to hang on a wall and ***I had to have it!***

I fully expected that if I bought it, John, my husband, would be disappointed with me making such a "weird" purchase. What was completely **unexpected** was that I would soon be divorced after many years of marriage and that this Predator would be a part of the healing process. The following are journal entries and some of the email correspondence between Black Heart's George Stephenson and me as I built and painted my Predator kit. Along the way, I learned a few things about model kits and some important things about myself. I should mention that this isn't going to be a rant about my ex. We are friends now but to avoid embarrassing him in any way, we'll call him John Smith.

Journal

October 9, 2010

I emailed Black Heart last night to find out how to purchase the mask. I already got an email from George and he said that it is not a mask that you can wear but is a model kit that you have to build and paint. He was really surprised that I still want to buy it. He said it's a model kit that even some experienced model artists are too intimidated to buy. He said that if I bought it, he'd help me with how to paint it. That actually sounds like fun. John will think I'm crazy but I'm going to do it anyway. I'll paint it by the TV with the movie paused on the part where the Predator takes off his mask and Arnold says, "You're one ugly mudduh...." I love that movie.

October 18

I got the Predator head today. Very cool. My wet-blanket-of-a-husband wasn't so crazy about it or about the \$200 I spent to buy it. John said it was a waste of money; he can be such a downer. I was disappointed with him thinking that he can control how I spend my money. Typical man!!

George emailed me about the kind of paint and glue to use. Sounds like I can get most of the stuff at Home Depot or at craft stores. Just have to find the colors I want. He made a few recommendations and I'm off to go shopping.

October 19

I picked up Krylon Gray Primer spray paint; Krylon Flat Black spray paint; Krylon Satin Almond spray paint; Krylon Clear Matte spray and Krylon Clear Gloss spray; Rust-oleum Ultra Cover 2x Satin Slate Blue spray paint; superglue, paint brushes, pastel chalks, and various colors of acrylic paints. With the acrylic paints I bought large bottles of the primary colors of the color wheel, red, blue and yellow. I got small bottles of secondary color wheel colors, green, orange and purple. I also bought large bottles of black white and brown. This way I could easily mix every color with very little paint investment. I'm going to start painting out in the garage. John is not happy that I'm doing this project and thinks I'm nuts for doing this.

Before I started painting, I washed all the parts with soap and water and let them dry. I'll start tomorrow. Tonight, we are going to ride our bikes and meet some friends for drinks.



October 20

I masked off the mouth to keep the spray paint from getting in and then sprayed the face and the rest of the head with grey primer. I spray painted the dreads with Krylon Flat Black Primer. I used multiple coats in order to get the paint down into all of the crevices. After the primer dried, I clear-coated both the dreads and the head with Krylon Clear Matte spray. Even at this early stage, Predator was looking pretty good.

I didn't find a decent Predator custom for the office party. Instead, I went as a fanged clown.

November 10

My life is taking on a personal transition. My husband and I are divorcing. I'm now searching the internet for a house that I want to move into and I'm busy packing all my things into boxes. I packed my Predator and wrote on the box "fragile" in big letters. I feel like I'm on a roller coaster with the emotions. One minute I'm depressed and sad and then the next I feel so good thinking about my new life that is just around the corner.

December 27

Today, I'm on day two of unpacking in my new (old) home. As old as this house is, it has beautiful views out the windows and has good energy that radiates from the walls. I think it's time to start creating new memories and a new life. I have a basement here and it has a built in work station that is surrounded in old cement. This is where I'll set up a place that I can someday work on my Predator. I'll call it "The Dungeon." I came across the box that has my Predator in it. I looked at it and felt sad because I know it's going to be a while before I can get back to the fun stuff of watching him come to life. Sadly, I kiss the box and whispered to the Predator a promise that I won't forget about him.

May 24, 2011

Back in touch with Black Heart and ready to get back to my fun little project. I was worried that George wouldn't remember me. When I emailed Black Heart, I was really surprised that he did not forget me. I told him I'm ready to get back to work on Predator. I figured he would be sorry he ever sold me this thing with all the questions I'm asking. But he was cool with it and suggested that we



document this build up with photos and with comments as I go. He said he wanted us to write an article that would show modelers that if a "garage kit virgin" can do a 1:1 scale Predator, anyone can. We decided to use our emails and my journal for the article. So here we go.

May 28

My Predator is all primed and ready for the base coat. I chose Krylon Almond Satin spray paint for the base color, and sprayed it all over the grey primer on the head. I then darkened around the eyes with Krylon Flat Black spray paint.

I had to switch brands to get the right tone I wanted on the dreads. So, I very lightly sprayed the dreads with Rust-Oleum Ultra Cover 2x Satin Slate Blue. They came out great. I sent George photos and he said "I dig this and I'm hoping some of the folks who are too intimidated to try a 1:1 scale model kit will be motivated and inspired when they see that

a 'girl', who never painted a model kit, did a 1:1 scale Predator."

My brother, Jake, and his wife, Kristi, came over for dinner. Dinner was a little late because I got distracted by the Predator. I spent just a *little* too much time painting. I took them down to The Dungeon and showed them the Predator. Kristi was visibly disturbed but Jake just grinned at the Predator and said "Cool!" That felt good. He's my brother and no one knows me better than my brother.



Back side of Predator head with shims for support

June 4

George told me I should get the Predator ready for mounting on the wall before I do all the detail work. Doing it now will keep me from messing up the paint work on the front of the head and will be easier at this stage. This is a pretty scary part for me because I just bought my first power drill and have only a little experience using it. *And no matter what, my precious Predator can't be hurt!*

So, with butterflies in my stomach, I laid the head face down on a pillow and positioned the dreads so I could see how they fit onto the head. I laid together 2 shims (the little wooden wedges that help even out the level of a book case or some other piece of stationary furniture in a room where the floor is uneven); they are each about 8 inches long, 1.5 inches wide and ¼ inch thick.

I found that that one dread didn't line up flush with the head from the back but from the front they both lined up perfectly. So, I drilled a small starter hole in each of the dread pieces and in the head; these holes should be aligned so you can use them to screw the wooden strips onto the back of the Predator. That wood will help hold those dreads onto the head in case the glue ever fails.

Now I can hang him on the wall so I can admire my work. 😊

June 5

I really like how this is coming and want to keep going. Today, I'm going to work on the Predator's mouth, detail the top of his head, paint his necklace, and finish the jewelry in his dreads. I realize that is a lot to get done in one day but I'll do my best. I've looked at a few of the photos in Black Heart's Gallery for ideas and I think I've come up with a plan of my own. I'll use metallic colors (copper, silver and gold) and mix in other colors for more variety. I'll use non-metallic colors on some of the beads.



My plan for the mouth was to paint the base color and then dry-brush over the detail inside the mouth with mixed color that is a couple of tones lighter than the base. But I have to admit that I had to paint the inside of the mouth a couple of times to get the color the way I wanted. At first it was too pink. So, I did a darker wash and that was too red.

I also struggled with dry brushing. George had told me that to do the dry brushing, I needed to dip my brush into the paint and then wipe it off on a piece of paper until there is almost no paint on the brush and then lightly stroke over the high points in the mouth. I did this horizontally and the paint got into the darker parts of the mouth that wasn't supposed to have the dry brushing on it.



June 17 I re-did the base color for the mouth with red, purple, brown and some flesh mixed with white. Satisfied with that color, I mixed enough to have plenty extra for the mandibles and for touch ups. Then I did the dry-brushing but this time I dry-brushed in vertical strokes on the raised ridge of the mouth. This looked great and was much easier. (This is something I understand as it applies to doing hair weaves. If you are good painting a life-sized Predator, you'll be good doing hair color. I told George that if he ever needed to dye someone's hair, he should call me. I said I'd walk him through it.)



After I was satisfied with the base color in the mouth, I added white and flesh-color to that base color for dry-brushing inside of the mouth.

June 18

We were going to go camping today but we got rained out. Not a total loss; more time to work on my Predator.

Last month, when I sprayed the Krylon Satin Almond on the face and head for my basecoat, I didn't paint the chin. So, I needed to paint the chin and to blend it with

the colors of the face. I cut a hole for the chin in a paper towel and laid it over the mouth to keep the spray paint from getting in.



I then sprayed the chin with my Krylon Almond Satin spray paint and feathered the edges by angling the spray paint can as I sprayed; it looks perfect. The mouth is blended perfectly, too.

I took a break from working on the mouth and detailed the top and sides of the head. I used brown and black pastel chalks in the wrinkles and crevices on the top of the head, around the side of the head and around the little horns sticking out along the side of the head. Then I sprayed it lightly with Krylon Clear Gloss just to lock in my chalk work.

Next, I dry-brushed the top of the head with a color slightly lighter than my base color. I wanted to make those ridges pop more and to bring out the detail. I wanted the dry-brush color to be light enough that it shows but without completely covering the colors underneath. So, I very slowly built it up with a VERY dry-brush.

After looking at some of the photos in Black Heart's Gallery, I dry-brushed a patterned area on the top of the head so that it has kind of a heart-shaped pattern outlined; I went back with my black pastel chalk and shaded to make the heart-shape more visible. Then I did a little more highlighting with chalks around the ridge of the head and in the crevices. When I was satisfied with that look, I sprayed my clear matte coat on the top of the head. With all of that finished, I painted the neck flat black like the primer for the dreads and then finished painting the jewelry around the neck and in the dreads with silver, copper, titanium, and then black and brown for the leather ties in the dreads.



The Dungeon

June 21

I've been cultivating the friendships that get put on the back burner when one is married for so many years. So, today a friend who watched the first *Predator* movie with me so many years ago came over. After drinking a warm cup of yummy Hawaiian Kona coffee, we went down to The Dungeon and checked out my Predator. He was amazed at how cool it looked. He was surprised at the bead work in the hair and said that he didn't think the Predator had so many beads. I explained that this was the Elder from the end of *Predator 2*. The Elder wore more beads than the others did. My friend couldn't believe how much work it looked like I put into it. Little does he know how easy and how fun this project is.

June 22

I cleaned up and organized The Dungeon because I plan to spend next weekend doing Predator's eyes and I want to get them right. Amazing some of the crazy stuff that found its way to my little studio like my dog's hair that gets everywhere and cobwebs that form over night in the corners of my work area, my ex's favorite coffee cup which I use to clean paint brushes (just kidding!).

Anyway, George said "The eyes are the most challenging part of a kit, especially with a life-sized model. If you nail the eyes, you've got a winner no matter what the rest of the head looks like. The eyes make him breathe. And, Predator's eyes are easier than human eyes because you can take liberties and kind of do what you want."

June 24

I read Fred DiSanto's article, *The Eyes Have It!*, on Black Heart's T & A page (<http://www.blackheartmodels.com/files/eyes.pdf>). Then I looked at some of the photos on the Gallery page. I am ready to take on the eyes and I have decided on a plan that is unique. If it looks bad, I'll start over.



Now, I don't feel so bad.

I started by painting the whole eye black. And, WOW! Just painting them black brings life to him. I decided on yellow-orange for the irises. Then I centered the pupil with black paint. I didn't do all the loops and lines that human eyes have. Instead, I kept it simple as the Predator's eyes should be and did a large circle for the iris and on top of that I placed a black pupil.

I emailed George after the first try and told him I was thinking about doing them over. I wasn't satisfied and I knew I could do better. He said, "I never nail the eyes on my first try. Never! It always takes me 3 or 4 tries."



June 25

I used acetone and a Q-tip to clean the paint out of the eyes so I could start over. Then I painted the eyes black again. This time, though, I tried something a little different. George suggested that I use a Q-tip and dip it into white paint. I made a white dot and then started enlarging the dot in a circle until I got the iris the size I wanted. Next I did the same thing with yellow-orange over the top of the white. I was careful to cover all the white with yellow-orange. Then using a Q-tip once again, I made his pupils black. This came out much better than using a brush and trying to free-hand it. After I was

satisfied with the color, size and shape of the irises and pupils, my last step was to coat them with liquid gloss. I did a couple coats of gloss and that helped hide any brush strokes or roughness there. I painted the eyes three times before I was satisfied.

July 5

I've been dating a guy and I invited him over for dinner. He loves horror films, something we both have in common. He's turned me on to some scary movies that were excellent. When I showed him my Predator, he was amazed. He said he was jealous because this is the kind of project that he'd love to do himself. I told him that I thought maybe I'd hang it in the sunroom that is 3/4 enclosed in glass, and is the entrance to the front of my house. He insisted that it would be unwise to do this because he felt that someone would steal this awesome "work of art". I thought this was funny because, until now, I hadn't thought of my Predator as a work of art. I like that. I decided that he was right and that, when I'm finished, I'll hang it in the office in my house instead.

I'm hooked. I emailed George today and asked, "Can you recommend an airbrush? I want to do another project of yours with it. The three I like are Medusa, Mr. Hyde, and Cyclops." I think I can do an awesome Cyclops but Hyde will be retired sooner.

July 11

Today I want to focus on finishing the teeth and mandibles to give them that "used" or aged look. I painted them an off-white and let them dry well. Then I sprayed them with clear matte finish. Next, I ground up brown pastel chalk and mixed in some yellow and white chalk to lighten it just a bit. Once I had the color I wanted, I dipped a Q-tip in the mix and rubbed that color on the teeth where they appear to grow out of the gums. I faded that color gradually up the teeth so the darker color is at the gum line and the lighter "aging" effect eventually fades to the tip of the tooth. I did the same for the mandibles and larger teeth and rubbed some of that chalk down into the cracks and grooves of those parts. When done, I hit them with clear gloss spray. I like the way this looks. They look like real teeth! I had to switch to super glue to assure that the teeth would stay in. I had started using Gorilla glue but some of the teeth fell out and didn't hold well enough. Super glue worked perfectly.



July 16

There are 50 little horn-like things poking their way through the skin on Predator's jaw and the ridges of his head. I painted them the same way I painted the teeth. I started with off-white and then used chalk for aging and detailing. Did I mention that there are more than 50 (yes, 50!) of these little horn-like things that have to be painted?

I painted the quills the same color as the little horny things. I got a bottle of Clear Gloss and brushed over it the eyes to make them look wet. I also used clear gloss in the mouth so it looks wet and organic. George suggested that I let the glossing of the eyes and mouth be the last thing I do. That allowed me to give the whole head a shot of matte finish to lock everything in before doing the last gloss coat of the eyes and mouth.

Finished!

I've hung him on my wall and can't stop looking at him. I can't believe I did this. George said he was blown away by the job I did on this. He said, "You should be proud of yourself. I sure am." He said his girlfriend and his kids were impressed, too.

Epilogue

Here it is now almost a year after I ordered Black Heart's Predator. Stores are starting to have that fantastic feeling of Halloween, one of my favorite "holidays" and I've got my favorite monster hanging on my wall. I've come so far from the way I felt when I started bringing my Predator to life. I feel as if I, too, have come alive. Painting the Predator helped me to keep occupied so that I focused on fun and positive things. And it helped me clear my mind and to relax. It was a project that tapped into an artistic side of me and helped build my self confidence. No, I had never painted a model but I should mention that I've also never written an article like this. So, the painting **and** the writing helped me get past the grief after my divorce from a marriage that I was very devoted to.

I had to learn to be on my own again after twelve years. This project showed me that I could do home improvement things around my house, things that, before this, I wouldn't even have thought about doing. I often come into my office before I have to tend to some fix-it project in my house and I look at my finished Predator (put together by me, painted by me!) and I think to myself "if I can

paint the Predator with such detail and bring such a life-like quality to it, then I can easily figure out how to fix whatever needs to be fixed in my house and in other areas of my life."

During this last year, I learned that I had been living my life on someone else's terms. For a long time, it had been difficult for me to realize that my life is my choice. I admit that I kind of fell into working on the Predator wall-hanger but the divorce allowed me the freedom to pursue, without judgment, something that was really fun, something that I really wanted to do.

My ex-husband was so against me having anything to do with finishing a 1:1 scale model of the Predator. But I saw a lot of change in John and in his attitude toward this project. And, when I needed his help taking photos of me with the finished kit, he looked at the finished Predator and said "This looks great!" Then he said with a laugh, "That's not quite right. Let me rephrase that; it looks awful." I figured that is going to be the best I'll get from him and, you know what, I'll take it. I know he is impressed.

It is interesting that people easily accept someone working on car or truck models. But a monster model?! Some people seem to have a problem with that. They are uncomfortable with it or think you are weird. And with that in mind, I never told my dad and stepmother about my Predator model. My stepmother is snooty; she's Martha Stewart on steroids and I couldn't take additional "judgment" from them. That the divorce was already a black mark on me was about as much as I could take. But now I've gotten to the point where I think "What the heck!?"



Annette Smith and the first model kit she ever painted

"If I can paint a cool project like a 1:1 scale Predator, anyone can..."

After the divorce, I started settling back into being a single woman. There was a guy that I was starting to get to know but I wasn't really feeling it for him. Not sure how to let him know that we really weren't hitting it off, I thought about sending him a picture of the Predator that I was working on. I figured it would turn him off and you know what? It worked perfectly and I never heard from him again. I'd recommend this tactic for all you single and dating readers. Make your hobby work for you. 😊

I am now hooked on garage kits and I can't wait to get another model from Black Heart. I couldn't believe how much housework didn't get done because I got so into painting my Predator. Funny how fast time passed when I was working on him. But, I had something really cool to show for it.

I would really like to paint three more: Mr. Hyde, Medusa, and the Cyclops. Mr. Hyde is such a handsome devil; I have to have him on my wall, too.

I've thought about getting an airbrush but after finishing the Predator, I realized that I really love the challenge of hand painting; I might still get one but an airbrush is not necessary. I was really surprised that my Predator came out so realistic looking and without a bit of airbrushing. Good instructions and patience make such a difference. If I can paint a cool project like a 1:1 scale Predator, anyone can and you'll have so much fun and appreciation for the great work that you've accomplished, just like me.

I guess the biggest lesson I learned since buying and finishing my Predator is to live your life for yourself and to have fun.