Art with heart

Carol shared the process of creating a new animal sculpture from scratch with us – visit *www.joburgnorth.getitonline.co.za* to take a look.

For the past six years, artist Carol Slabolepszy has brought light and life into countless homes through her incredible creations, aptly named My Hares and Graces. Distinctly unusual and unendingly charming, these life-size animal sculptures are leaving their paw prints all over the world.

First and foremost, I'm a creative thinker and an inherently practical person.' From her light-filled studio in Linden, this feels like the perfect line to describe Carol Slabolepszy, the incredibly talented woman behind My Hares and Graces. Boxes and files fill the neat shelves lining the studio walls, labelled as the temporary homes for everything from 'scraps of felt', to 'buttons,' and sitting perfectly alongside large canvases and work-in-progress sculptures. 'Yes, I regard myself as an artist, and I also feel I'm a manufacturer in the true sense of the word – 'manus' means 'hand' in Latin.'

As a creative, Carol's hands have always been at the centre of work and play, long before her beautiful animal sculptures started to come to life. 'The expression of my creativity has been diverse, from making waterproof picnic mats 25 years ago – which became known as Practicarols – to studying Fine Art as a mature student at Wits Tech for four years, to the sculpting and painting I do now.' And of course, it's her My Hares and Graces sculptures that have made her a regular at events like Kamers/Makers each year, with many customers returning again and again to add to their growing sculpture collections. 'My Hares and Graces is about creating something that's lovely to look at, that makes people smile and gives them pleasure. My sculptures start as a lump of clay followed by good, old-fashioned squashing and pushing, adding and subtracting and finally breathing a little of my own soul into each animal. I get enormous satisfaction knowing there are pieces of myself all over the country and the world. Recently a Mvundla went to Sydney, Australia and there's an order for one to go to Kansas, USA ... I hope he's allowed in!'

Each life-sized animal in Carol's range begins as a clay sculpture which she expertly creates by hand, which is then used to make a mould that's hand-cast using acrylic resin. From there, the animals are all meticulously finished by hand so each has its own special character. 'The inspiration for My Hares and Graces came from a deep need, after a hiatus of several years, to use my creativity and generate an income.

I realised that painting was not going to 'do it' for me, because I needed a way to replicate my work but at the same time keep it special. At first, there were only five different hares ... now the 'family' has grown to 12 different hares, seven different cats and four dogs.'

With each sculpture micro-chipped to ensure it's an authentic animal from My Hares and Graces, Carol says it's been incredible to see how they've also helped so many people who are mourning the loss of a beloved pet. 'Over the past six years I've been making my sculptures, the muse for my cats was a much-loved family feline. After he died, I created a work dedicated to him and placed his ashes inside. Today, for anyone who'd like to remember their pet in a special way, they can also choose from a variety of sculptures and finishes and have the name or a memory engraved onto the sculpture, to remember forever.'

While her creativity is definitely the driving force behind her work, Carol's strong practical side is also clearly key to everything she does. 'The biggest lesson I've learnt is that every difference makes a difference. I got this useful expression from our drawing lecturer at Wits Tech in 1999, and I apply it still ... every day! It's the essence of analysis, and by asking the questions why, where, what, how, when and who, you unpack the meaning of anything really – whether it's art you're considering, or a political statement.' And while My Hares and Graces is definitely her creative child, the practical way in which the growing business has been able to help others around her is also something Carol is proud of. 'Many years ago, I read an article in a newspaper about the difference we can make with the motto 'Each One Employ One'. In the beginning, I learned to make my own moulds and do the casting, then I was lucky enough to meet a wonderful man called Petrus Daluka who's a master mould maker and he does my casting.'

Today, Carol feels that recognition continues to be one of the biggest challenges facing South Africa's artists. 'It frustrates me that there's still a perception that the arts are regarded as poor cousins to the sciences. The fact is, the arts are vital to the emotional well-being of any society – humans have expressed themselves with mark-making for thousands of years. There's something very immediate and satisfying about drawing with a piece of charcoal, or simply drawing with a finger in the condensation on a window pane or making animals with clay from a river. There's an emphasis on technology (and we cannot deny that it's not going to go away) but my heart almost stops when I see small children swiping a smart phone for entertainment. I'm not a Luddite, but there's so much to be learnt from holding a crayon or a pencil and making marks on a surface. Children must learn to look, to question, to interpret.'

Going forward, Carol has no intention of slowing down – and with so many beautiful animals coming out of her studio, we're glad to hear it. 'Currently I'm working on a new pair of hares as well as another dog ... I'm really always working! I'm also sewing and knitting and finishing a quilt for my son – I love what I do, and can't exist without being creative. There's enormous reward in spreading a bit of gentleness in this sometimes rather blunt world.'

Details: To view the full My Hares and Graces range and purchase one for yourself, visit Carol's website at www.myharesandgraces.co.za and keep up with their adventures on Facebook and Instagram at @myharesandgraces

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