

The New ARTISANS

By Cindy Frenkel

AS

the boundaries of fine art grow increasingly broad and skeptics wonder if specific artists are able to draw a perfectly proportioned figure, one can find a certain comfort in crafts, where technical expertise is as important as the artist's intent. These artworks are unpretentious, intimate, intricate and, best of all, affordable.

The world of crafts has made tremendous growth in the past two decades. Up until the early sixties, most modern craftspeople were unable to make a living at their trade. The transformation began in 1965 with the birth of American Craft Enterprise, an organization founded to create high-quality, juried craft fairs open to both wholesale buyers and the public. This much-needed forum has elevated the atmosphere in which craftspeople can show and sell their work. It also has brought about a higher level of crafts and

a better-educated public.

Some excellent craftspeople are working around the Detroit area. On the following pages we feature five artists who are among Michigan's best. They have influenced each other through their work and often through friendships. Charla Khanna and Tracy Gallup make dolls. Jo Powers constructs and paints narrative boxes. Laurie Eisenhardt creates ceramic trays. Chris Roberts-Antieau makes Prismacolor drawings and quilted wall hangings. Often these artists use recognizable symbols and images of animals. Their works are visually striking and, unlike poetry or music, they have a fragility similar to our own, based on their sheer physical presence. By their very existence, they are life-affirming and rejuvenating.

In this season of art fairs and festivals, we celebrate the coming out of these new artisans.

Portraits photographed by Richard Hirneisen

“Oh God, there’s so much going on you wouldn’t believe it,” Faxon says. “There’s a bill I’ve been supporting for years on the calendar. It’s called a living will and allows a terminal patient the right to decide in advance who will make the decisions about the extent of life-prolonging techniques that will be utilized should he become unconscious. Fifty percent of our medical costs in America are spent on the last thirty days of life. It’s terrible. We have this incredible investment in prolonging the dying process.”

The Senate was supposed to take up the bill that morning, but Faxon ran into unexpected problems.

“They didn’t want to take it up. I started running around trying to figure out what was going on. The amendments I had were pretty straightforward, and all of a sudden it’s off the tracks. I finally find out it’s a problem over in the House. There’s a similar bill over there . . . and they’re not sure what’s going to happen with it . . . and Right to Life has amendments to that bill . . . and they’re not sure they want to take up my bill today . . . and if it does come up today they’re going to oppose it.”

Faxon opens the door to the Lansing Center convention hall and the focus immediately shifts to the Michigan Association of Community Arts Agencies, which is sponsoring a luncheon for the state’s arts councils and organizations.

Faxon’s table is with the Novi Arts and Culture Committee. The waitress takes one look at him and says: “You must be the fish.”

Yes, he called ahead requesting something other than chicken.

He’s obviously glad to be out of the Senate for a spell. “There are only two animals that eat in public. Chimpanzees at the zoo and Michigan state senators,” he says of all the munchers he’s left behind at their Senate-floor desks.

At the end of the luncheon a microphone is passed around the room for the introduction of dignitaries. Faxon playfully scans the room and tells his hostess from Novi to: “Introduce me as the most senior legislator here. I am.”

She agrees.

“I’d like to introduce Michigan’s oldest senator, Jack Faxon,” she says, fudging her line.

Faxon buries his head in his hands for a few seconds, before taking the mike: “The Senate is still in session, but I’m the only one with the temerity, the will and nerve to leave the floor and be here

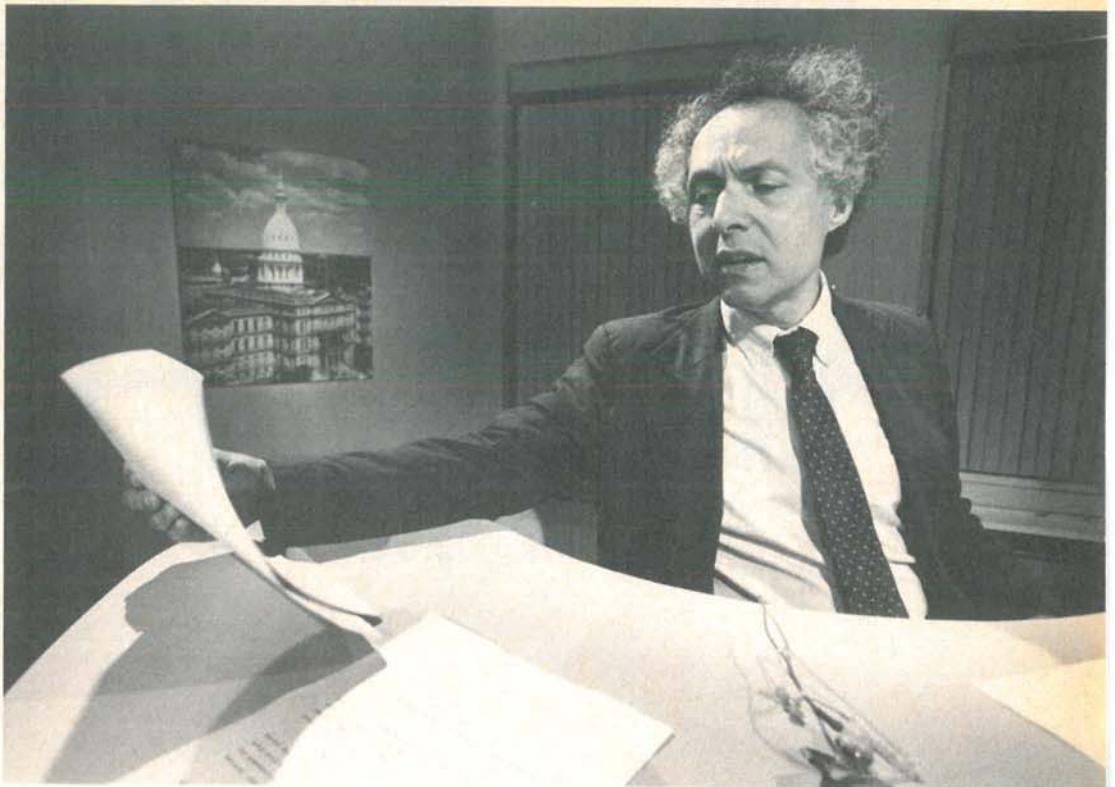
with the artists.” Wild applause.

“He was there,” Marilyn Wheaton later says, “because he really considers the people in the arts to be his friends. If the arts were taken away from society I think he would be diminished.”

Faxon motions that he has to get back to the Senate and asks to be excused a

in 1961 at age 25, the youngest member of the Constitutional Convention.

He’d always been precocious. Born near the Fisher Building, Faxon’s family gradually followed the traditional northwesterly Jewish migration away from the central city. He graduated from Central High School at 16 and was stu-



little early. It takes him, however, fifteen minutes to get out of the room. A veritable receiving line stops him.

“Years ago, we twisted the night away. I’m so glad you’re still supporting the arts.”

“I remember when you were an auctioneer at that fund-raiser . . .”

“It was 1975, you came up to Interlochen with us for four or five days.”

“I’m at one of the sites of the Regional Arts Service Centers, I just want to thank you.”

Faxon’s mouth opens.

“You’re a person who exists because of me. I created her,” he shouts to no one in particular. They hug.

“I’m a hero everywhere I go except on the Senate floor,” he says on the way back to the Capitol. “That woman is a direct product of something I’d worked on for years — a program where we have arts specialists around the state who service school districts that couldn’t afford art teachers.”

After strolling up the sidewalk to the Capitol, Faxon breaks into a gallop when he touches the first stair outside. He doesn’t break stride, making his way up inside to the Senate floor.

“I’ve always been the fastest up.”

JACK FAXON FIRST CAME TO LANSING

dent teaching high school at 19 while still attending classes at Wayne State University. He eventually landed a teaching slot at Jefferson Junior High. After picking up his masters degree in 1959, Faxon became a fixture at Southwestern High School, where he began every class by drawing on the blackboard. The art teacher took favorable notice one day.

“He gave me watercolors and paper,” the senator now says. “I stayed up all night painting. The art teacher critiqued me and said that I’d be better off not going to art school.”

Faxon has had several shows of his abstracts, which have evolved through several styles in the last thirty years.

“When I did my first show it was the first time there was an art show of abstracts by a sitting legislator. We had a press opening in Detroit, but the Pope came to America that day and I was overlooked.”

Since then Faxon has acted out other artistic fantasies. He’s narrated with the Detroit Symphony, conducted the Detroit Concert Band, played the role of Prince Orlovsky in *Die Fledermaus* for the Michigan Opera Theatre and danced (sort of) in *The Nutcracker*.

The arts were ingrained from an early
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CHARLA KHANNA DOLLMAKER

In a plain blue cinder block house in Ann Arbor — its Old World charm and lush, rambling shrubbery reminiscent of a pastoral European landscape — live Charla Khanna, her 17-year-old daughter Avani and their 16-year-old cat A la Carte. The figure of a cherub floats above the red front door, the first symbol of something otherworldly.

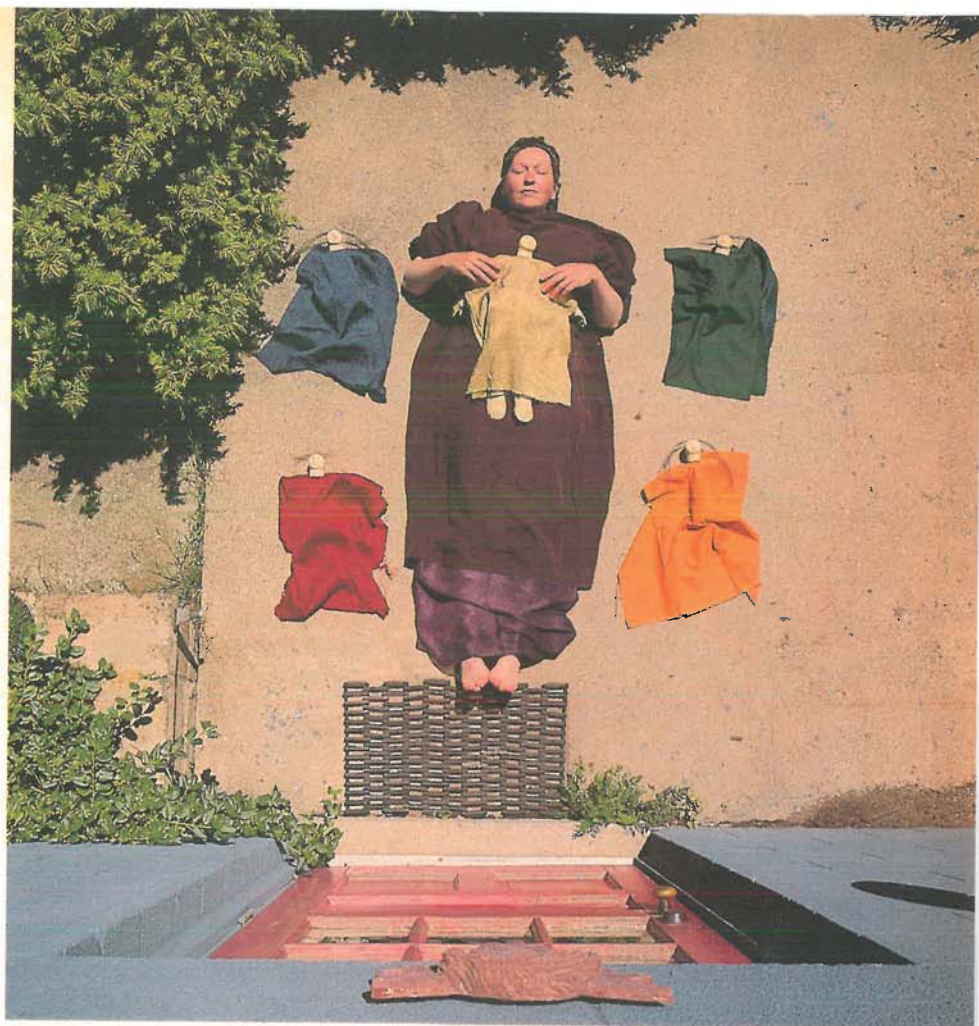
Inside, Charla Khanna stands in her large white studio. It is meticulously compartmentalized; piles of folded fabric hide behind simple muslin screens she's woven. Girlish though in her mid-forties, Khanna wears a simple, loose dress; her brown hair is shaped in a bowl cut. She bears a striking resemblance to her dolls.

She smokes a cigarette and tells a story: "A couple of years ago a social worker told me about a woman she took care of in a nursing home. The woman was indigent and without friends or family. She owned one braid doll of

Charla Khanna's dolls impart an otherworldly tranquility to their beholders. Opposite page: *Bird with Moon*, 11 inches from beak to tail, is one of her production pieces. Below, left: An example of a one-of-a-kind doll, *Night Garden*, stands 23 inches high. Right: Braid dolls, 11 inches high, are among Khanna's many whimsical production pieces.



PHOTOGRAPHS: CHARLA KHANNA



mine. The only person this woman ever connected with was this social worker. Right before she died, the old woman gave this doll to the social worker."

For the past seventeen years, Khanna, who is somewhat of a recluse, has been creating three categories of dolls — one-of-a-kinds, which are as tall as 30 inches; limited editions, which are several inches shorter; and production pieces, which vary in size. Her production pieces are simple, whimsical works: braid dolls with painted muslin heads, flying angels, rabbits, birds with moons hanging over them, fish and Pegasus. These pieces are moderately priced, ranging from \$20 to \$72.

Her more elaborate limited-edition (\$165) and one-of-a-kind dolls (\$270 to \$800) have papier-mache heads and are crafted in a variety of materials, patterns and textures. She often hand-dyes fabric for her dolls and sometimes she weaves it; other times, she tears, shreds, cuts and reassembles fabric.

The expressions on her dolls'

pale faces are so open and peaceful, they seem to impart some of that tranquility to their beholders. They seem otherworldly, as if they've achieved a higher level of spirituality than most of us.

These elements describe Khanna's essence, too: she's working toward her masters degree in pastoral ministry at Marygrove College. She views her dollmaking as a way of life, not as a business, and doesn't use such words as "buy" and "sell" because "it feels incorrect."

While growing up in various parts of California, Khanna made dolls, but it wasn't until about twenty years ago that she thought about making them for others. She and her then-husband had moved to Ann Arbor, and Khanna began exhibiting both serigraphs and dolls at the Ann Arbor Art Fair. The dolls went over so well that by her third summer at the fair she brought only dolls. Now they are legend at the fair, where people begin gathering at her booth before dawn.

Her work also can be found at Peaceable Kingdom in Ann Arbor.



Laurie Eisenhardt
CERAMIST

“**M**AKING these things and knowing that they serve as touchstones, sparks, reminders of the positive potential inside people, is a wonderful feeling,” says Laurie Eisenhardt. The 28-year-old artist, who grew up in Mount Clemens, makes ceramic trays adorned with images of people and animals, particularly cats. She and her husband, commercial photographer Richard Doyle, live in a pink gingerbread house in Royal Oak with a large handmade wooden swing on the porch. Her painting is done in a bedroom upstairs, where pastel-colored cats lie sideways lined up in racks, and her kiln is in the basement. Her work is intensely patterned, reminiscent of Gustav Klimt’s paintings, yet far more playful, like ornamented Eastern European dolls.

Though her mother encouraged her daughter’s artistic eye, Eisenhardt’s first visit to a museum wasn’t until after high school graduation in 1978, when she toured the Detroit Institute of Arts. However, her high school art teacher helped her prepare a portfolio, which won her a first-year scholarship to the Center for Creative Studies.

After graduating in 1982, Eisenhardt cleaned and gardened for women in Grosse Pointe. She was fascinated and curious about everything in their houses. “They had Royal Doulton and Toby mugs on the mantels, and little ceramic ladies having tea with the wind moving through their dresses. All these valuable things I was dusting that were worth money. I didn’t like them for me, but they were great for them.” Eisenhardt wondered if she could create objects that were reflective of her own taste.

In her spare time, she’d been making marionettes with clay heads and steel-wool hair. When she showed the dolls to her house-cleaning clients, they invariably re-

sponded with, “Can’t you make them prettier?”

Eisenhardt recalls that her work still retained “that macabre art-school influence.”

Then, at a local doll show in 1982, Eisenhardt met artist/doll-maker Tracy Gallup. The two women quickly became friends. Two years later Eisenhardt received a six-month Michigan Council for the Arts grant to study under Gallup. Gallup became a role model; she made a living at art, was married and wanted a traditional life-style.

In 1985, friend and fellow artist Marcia Hovland encouraged Eisenhardt, who was still working with dolls, to get involved with clay. That year she and Hovland took a ceramics class together at Oakland Community College, where she first began making her trays. “The whole process of clay is intriguing because once it’s in the kiln you lose control of it,” Eisenhardt says. “When I take my work out of the kiln, it’s like having Christmas presents.”

Eisenhardt’s trays, which average \$100, are at Peaceable Kingdom in Ann Arbor and Ariana Gallery in Birmingham.

Ceramist Laurie Eisenhardt finds satisfaction in creating her intensely patterned trays. Top: *Cat with Bird*, 10½ inches long by 6½ inches wide. Bottom: *Boy Riding Elephant*, 11¾ inches long by 6½ inches wide.



PHOTOGRAPHS: RICHARD DOYLE



JO POWERS
PAINTER/ILLUSTRATOR

BOXES have always intrigued Jo Powers. She finds mystery inherent in their form. For Christmas presents a few years back, she decided to construct some boxes and paint them with abstract designs. Today her boxes have evolved into a storytelling process that combines her love of the narrative with her talent for painting. Powers grew up in Riverview and Warren. She graduated from Wayne State University in 1974 with a degree in fine arts and received an M.F.A. in 1977 from Syracuse University, where she studied painting.

The 38-year-old Powers relies on her intense, moody illustrations for freelance income, but her real passion lies in her paintings, whether on canvas or on her wooden boxes. She has a small studio in the basement of the Royal Oak duplex she shares with her husband Monty Weathers and their 6-year-old daughter Sarah. She creates detailed, compelling works of art while nearby, a basket of clothes sits on the washer waiting for her.

Meticulously sawing, sanding, priming and painting each box, she derives pleasure from every stage. Four inches square and 2 inches deep, the scene on each box lid portrays an action; once opened, the bottom reveals the scene's progression, exposing some minor accident that's happened, such as a broken cup or knocked-over chair.

Her work, which is influenced by Edward Hopper, shows both the

isolation and importance of mundane objects, which often become extraordinary. On the inside of one box, a pair of scissors is revealed as vital evidence in discovering the cause of an earlier accident. These works are intriguing and playful: to unearth some of their mystery, one must take part in the art and open them up.

In graduate school Powers began thinking of narrative ideas to use in her work. One such inspiration was her pet mouse, who continually cleaned himself. Her present series begins with a single mouse cleaning his home and a neighbor standing in the doorway. The neighbor joins in the work, then another mouse comes by. Soon several mice are cleaning, and eventually their domestic chores become excessive.

Powers' work is the one arena in which she feels completely in control, and it makes her happy. "I never get so unhappy as when things are going badly in my work. Ultimately, it's what you do that makes you happy."

Powers' boxes sell for \$275 at the Joy Emery Gallery in Grosse

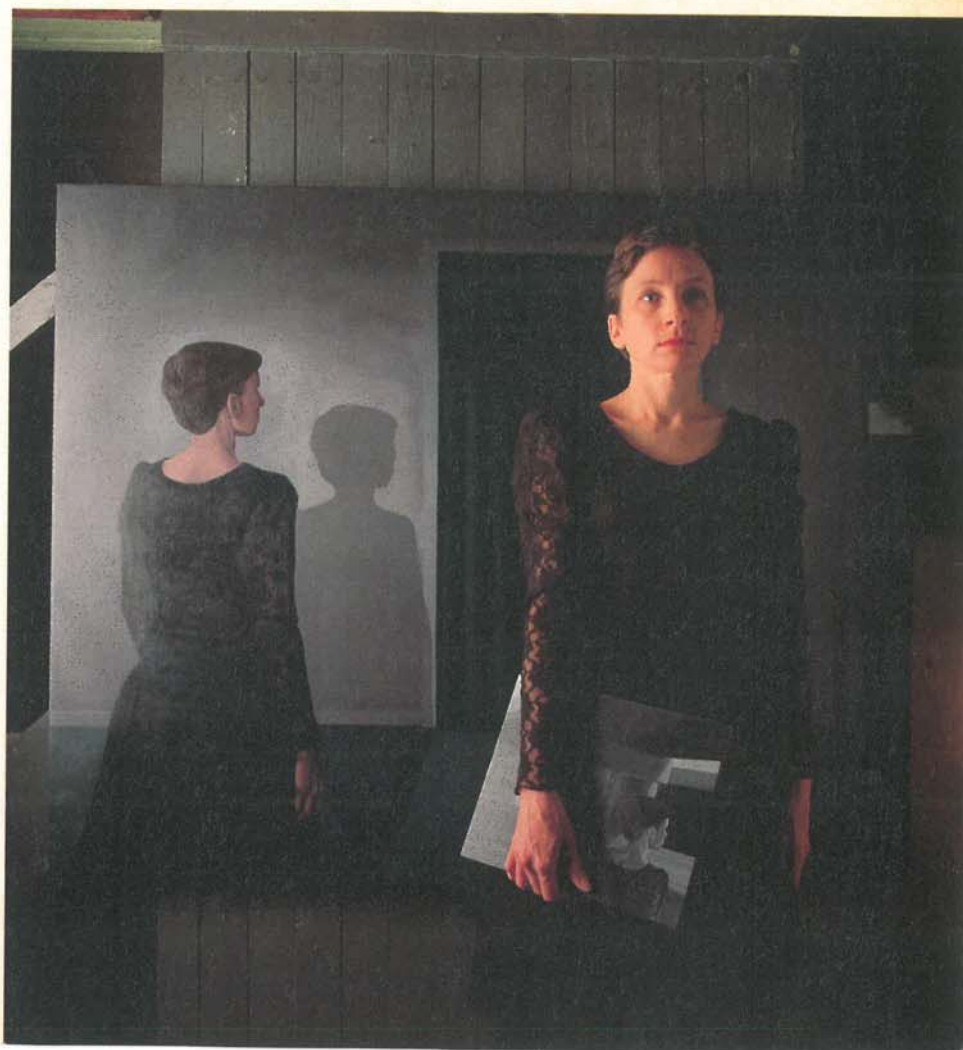
Pointe Farms and will be available later this summer at the Book Beat in Oak Park.

Cindy Frenkel is a Detroit freelance writer.



PHOTOGRAPHS: TIM THAYER

Painting, both on canvas and on the boxes shown here, is Jo Powers' passion in life. Left and above: *Untitled*, 4 inches square by 2 inches deep.



CHRIS ROBERTS-ANTIEAU

QUILTER

W

HEN Chris Roberts-Antieau was attending a two-dimensional drawing class at Eastern Michigan University in 1972, her instructor told the students to draw an India ink bottle he had laid out. Everyone drew the bottle true to size, except for Antieau, who drew a colossal version. In front of her classmates, the professor said, "Whoever told you that you could draw?" Antieau burst into tears, walked out of the classroom and never returned.

But she ignored his criticism; today forty galleries across the country carry her quilted cloth wall hangings and pencil drawings.

Antieau, 38, grew up in Plymouth and Brighton and now lives in Ann Arbor with her husband Darryl and their 13-year-old son Noah. In a two-story carriage house behind their red Victorian



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home, she creates works rich with symbols and animal images. Her human forms are usually exaggerated, appearing as kings, clowns or angels. Using the sewing machine as a drawing tool, Antieau shades, scribbles and makes dotted lines.

In 1978, as art fairs began to flourish, she started making humorous bed quilts and soft sculptures on her dining room table. They were an immediate success. A few years later, at the American Craft Show in Baltimore, Antieau exhibited clothing she had made, each piece featuring a secret pocket appliqued with an animal. They were so well received, buyers jammed into her booth. More than thirty galleries and stores, including Neiman Marcus, placed

orders. After the show, she had to hire eight people to work for her, including a production and business manager.

"It just wasn't the way I wanted my work to be done. It got so impersonal that I wasn't enjoying it anymore," Antieau says, so she took a year off to reevaluate what direction she wanted her work to take. During that time, she became friends with Ann Arbor artist Graceann Warn, who made framed, two-dimensional collages reminiscent of Joseph Cornell's boxes. This was the inspiration for Antieau's current creations.

This past spring, she got a call from a woman in Portland, Maine, who'd been attracted to one of Antieau's flying clowns in a local gallery. But when she went to buy it, she discovered it had been sold the day before.

The woman, who said she works with children who have cancer, said the flying clown symbolized her own sense of hope, which enables her to do such emotionally difficult work, and wondered if Antieau could make another clown. Antieau agreed and sent it off to Maine, along with a large drawing of a flying clown wearing green gloves, her gift for the children. Overwhelmed, the woman sent back drawings and collages of the children's interpretation of the clown.

"You know," Antieau says, putting her hand up to her heart, "that's what it's all about."

Antieau's work is at the Ann Arbor Street Art Fair and the Detroit Gallery of Contemporary Crafts in the Fisher Building.



PHOTOGRAPH: TIM THAYER

The quilted wall hangings and PrismaColor works of Chris Roberts-Antieau are rich with animal images. Top: *Dog Tricks*, PrismaColor drawing, 26 inches high by 32 inches wide. Above: *Three-ring Circus*, screen, 6 feet, 6 inches high by 7 feet wide.



TRACY GALLUP
DOLLMAKER

“**Y**OU must think I’m such a weirdo, just cutting these little tea bags.” Tracy Gallup says, carefully snipping the corners off tiny pieces of white paper. She stands at a drawing table in the dining room of her Royal Oak house. Nearby, two old glass-enclosed oak bookcases face one another, jammed with her dolls and a pot-pourri of toys. The Teapot Lady, her newest creation, sits on the drawing table; a thin string dangles over the doll’s face from inside her teapot-shaped head, which holds a miniature tea bag full of real tea. In one hand, the doll holds a cup and saucer; in the other, a piece of cake.

In all of her dolls, Gallup seems to be offering a kind of friendship. Each has its own personality, expressed through careful, intricate detail. Her characters allow us entry into a world where animal and man (sometimes even moons) live in each other’s forms.

Gallup, 36, works mostly in her studio, two blocks from the home she and her husband, photographer Doug Aikenhead, share with their year-old daughter Lydia. Gallup’s increasing love of domesticity has influenced the dolls she’s designed this year — the Teapot Lady and a baby doll, which bears a striking resemblance to her cherubic, blue-eyed daughter.

Growing up in Ann Arbor, Gallup was impressed by Charla Khanna’s dollmaking as an art form. Gallup studied art at Eastern Michigan University during the time Chris Antieau-Roberts was there, although the two didn’t meet until years later. In graduate school at Syracuse University, Gallup also met artist Jo Powers, whose mouse drawings she greatly admired.

For a year in 1979 to 1980, Gallup taught middle-school art near Chicago, but because it entailed more disciplining than teaching, it wasn’t something she enjoyed. “Part of the way I kept my sanity is that I made things with the kids,” she says. “I did the same project as an example.”



Gallup asked a class to make dolls. Later that year, she saw a book of Eskimo prints in which human and animal forms were combined; it was the inspiration for her dolls.

She quit teaching, and that summer drove a school bus part-time in Chicago. The rest of her time was devoted to dollmaking. She researched old-fashioned methods of dollmaking, then substituted comparable modern ingredients to invent the composition for dolls.

Late in the summer of 1980, her growing menagerie — a boy, a girl, a fox, rabbit, goose, cat and dalmatian — was ready. She loaded them in a basket and took them to Chicago craft galleries and boutiques, asking \$50 a doll. Today they sell for \$120 at about seventy stores and craft galleries around the country.

Gallup’s work is available at the Ann Arbor Street Art Fair, Peaceable Kingdom in Ann Arbor, the Book Beat in Oak Park, Ilona and Gallery in Farmington Hills and the Detroit Gallery of Contemporary Crafts.

Tracy Gallup’s dolls offer warmth and whimsy. Her intricate characters inhabit a world where animal and man live in one another’s forms. Right: Moonman, 10 inches high. Below: Frog, 11 inches high.



PHOTOGRAPH: DOUG AIKENHEAD



PHOTOGRAPH: DIRK BAKKER