

LOCAL ARTIST RECEIVES GOVERNOR'S *Arts* AWARD

By Elissa Fulton

Claudia Cartee may have humble beginnings from starting her pottery business in the back of a Volkswagen Beetle in the early 1970s, but today she is a notable artist and was recently celebrated by Gov. Phil Bryant as the recipient of a Governor's Arts Award from the Mississippi Arts Commission. Her talents range from handmade raku and stoneware to abstract painting.

Cartee has been immersed in the art world ever since she could remember. Her father was a master mold maker and her mother was his decorator, and they sold their unique pieces from coast to coast. As the daughter of two artists, Cartee has lived in southern California all the way to the southern portion of Florida. The excitement of working with her parents as a child, and opening a kiln for the first time after she made a piece of pottery, has remained with her to present day.

After earning her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from California State University, she has now settled in Seminary, on her father's home place – a place she describes as “very magical.” After moving to Mississippi, she continued her graduate work from the University of Southern Mississippi and became one of the pioneer members of the Craftsmen's Guild of Mississippi, three years after its inception.

Cartee's professional work in pottery began while working on her B.F.A. in ceramics from Cal State. Working street shows from a mobile booth in her Volkswagen Beetle along Laguna Beach, she was able to make enough to support herself financially through her college years in the early 1970s.

After joining the Craftsmen's Guild, Cartee was awarded a scholarship and spent two weeks at the Penland School of Crafts in Spuce Pines, N.C.

“It was in the early 1980s, at Penland,

that I learned raku. I studied with Penelope Fleming there and learned the raku and hand building,” said Cartee. “I did a whole series for several years and then I stopped doing the hand built raku as my art expression and started doing all kinds of stoneware. About six years ago, I became inspired again to do the



Cartee hand builds these figurative pieces before raku firing them in the kiln. Her unique touch gives them an antiqued appeal.

hand building and I am starting to do these new figurative pieces.”

Raku is quite a process and everything must work out just perfectly, as not to lose the artistic production. The pieces are hand built and fired in a kiln at 1,850 degrees and then placed into a combustible chamber of materials that will burn quickly to give it the desired

finish. Cartee admits she can still get quite intimidated when she is ready to fire her pieces.

“I have a lot of fun with these and I'm going to continue building them until they don't want to come out anymore,” she said. “It's really a fun balance to the stoneware.”

Cartee's first wheel throwing experience was at the age of 15, and it was then she learned to love clay. After moving to Mississippi in 1974, her father helped her build her first studio, which she and her husband Troy have since remodeled. Troy is a partner in the business and together they have built a gallery with their own four hands.

“It's perfect. It's right up the hill from our house. To get to work everyday, I just walk right up the hill,” she said.

As an artist, Cartee admits it is ideal to be out of the public eye and to have the creative space to get the work done, so naturally her rural studio and gallery is a perfect space for her.

Since Cartee and her husband have been together, they have always taken the summers off. While fly-fishing the rivers in Colorado, they found a perfect piece of land to purchase. Over the course of 16 summers, the pair have slowly built a cabin with a studio. Colorado has become a place of inspiration for Cartee.

“I do design things there. I will design new pieces, or if I have a commission for something that is going to take a lot of thought, that is where I like to do it,” she said. “And I also paint there. I don't paint here.”

Cartee's style is in abstract art and is a reflection of the energy she feels in the mountains. She currently has two paintings hanging at the Mary C. O'Keefe Cultural Center of Arts and Education in Ocean Springs, Miss.

“It's just a beautiful show. It's the national museum for women in the arts

and our Mississippi state committee is having a showcase of female artists,” she said. “I've got four pieces there – two pottery pieces and two paintings. And it is really a nice show; it's worth seeing.”

Another interesting aspect of Cartee's art is that she uses her own glazes – and some have taken decades to perfect. This is an area where Troy is an integral part of the business. After she gets inspired and perfects the formulas, Troy will make the glazes in large quantities for her pottery. Troy's ability to visualize space also makes him essential in helping with the kiln work.

“Troy has an impeccable mind, and he is so talented,” said Cartee. “That is why I am successful today, because of partnering with Troy Cartee.”

It was also Troy's urging that made it possible for the two to make a living with pottery full time and the business has allowed them to have a stress-free life.

“It's so amazing and I'm incredibly blessed. It's a good life! I love my life,” she said.

For many years, the Cartees traveled in their mobile trailer to regional shows to display their work. It has only been in recent years that they have stopped traveling and focus on their two gallery shows they host each year. They typically have a spring show and a fall show by invitation.

“It's a perfect kind of patronage, because I don't feel stressed,” she said.

When Claudia was trying to name the business many years ago, Ka was just the right name. When she was a young girl, an eccentric uncle nicknamed her and her sister Coo and Ca. She of course, was Ca. The nickname stuck, and she is known as Ca to all of her family and closest friends. After researching the meaning, she found out the ancient Egyptian symbol Ka means the spirit that lives on after death.

“It was really a magical moment and I just love the name,” she said. “So I sign all of my pottery Ka.”

Through this wonderful life she has had creating her art, Cartee admits that this award is thrilling, but also accepts that it is very humbling.

“It's so perfect at the age that I am now – and the fact that I have simplified the business to this point – to have statewide recognition like this,” she said. “Because we don't do travel shows anymore, there's many that don't know about me, so to have this recognition is

so wonderful. I'm so grateful to have experienced it.”

The awards ceremony was held at Duling Hall on Feb. 11, in Jackson. Afterwards, the recipients were invited to tour the Governor's mansion. Cartee was honored in the visual arts and the award was a sculpture made by renowned artist William Dunlap, as well as a signed and framed award from Governor Phil Bryant. Dixie Electric would like to congratulate Cartee on her achievement in the arts.

For more information about visiting the gallery and studio, visit www.kapotterystudio.com.



A painting hanging in Cartee's gallery is one of many she has painted while in her cabin in Colorado. The vibrant colors are a reflection of the “mountain energy.”



Claudia and Troy Cartee