

Pair shares love of art

Saturday, October 4, 2008

By MARIBETH WARD, Staff Writer

Putnam County is full of delightful surprises. One of the best is a beautiful art studio located northwest of Greencastle belonging to Marla Helton and Stu Fabe. The two are award-winning artists who create and sell gourd art.

Between the two they cover the gamut from high-end elegant pieces to the whimsical and practical. Their pieces, all using gourds, include sophisticated woven displays,quirky dolls with names and personalities, masks, pins and even purses. All made from hard-shell gourds.

It is very obvious that the two appreciate nature's gift of the gourd, recognizing the role the plant has played in human development. The most common uses of gourds were as containers and vessels but they were also used as musical instruments, decoration, currency and were even used in religious and ceremonial rituals.



Artist Marla Helton gives partner and fellow artist Stu Fabe a couple of tips in the weaving of an art piece made out of a gourd. The two award-winning artists create their work in a studio just northwest of Greencastle

"We feel a strong connection to nature and our art reflects that commitment. In essence, we enjoy giving 'artistic life' to an entity that once held 'natural life,'" claimed Fabe.

The couple grows over 1,000 gourds on their 36-acre farm every year. Preparing them for art is a long process beginning with the planting and nurturing of the plant. When the frost finally arrives they clip the stems and leave the gourds in the fields to dry on pallets. By spring they are hard and ready to be cleaned, cut, dyed and adorned.

Helton began weaving in 1990 and exhibiting her work. Combining pottery and weaving came first and then she began exploring ways to combine weaving with gourds.

"My first efforts were pretty primitive but after getting into several major art shows and having my work well received; I developed the confidence to continue moving into unfamiliar areas. I enjoy combining weaving with other media and like to incorporate natural and found items into my work," said Helton.

In 1995 she began teaching her art form to people all over the country.

In 2003 she lost her husband. A few years later she was exhibiting at a gourd show in Cincinnati where she met Fabe.



The Wild Women of Gourdonia can be seen in the background behind their creators Marla Helton and Stu Fabe. The whimsical women are the stars of a recently published book.

"This man came and bought one of my pieces. He kept coming back and buying other pieces," laughed Helton. Finally 11 gourds later they decided to spend some time together.

Fabe took a class that Helton was teaching in Vermont and learned the art form. He was already exhibiting his own photographic art in galleries in Cincinnati. He fell for Helton's art and for Helton. The two became partners and Stu joined Helton in Putnam County.

Fabe now creates many of the sophisticated pieces the couple exhibits and sells at juried art fairs all over the Midwest.

"I had a very good teacher," laughs Fabe who moved here three years ago.

Fabe's artwork will be featured on the cover of the Nov., 2008 issue of Sunshine Artist magazine. He recently won an award in the mixed media category in the 7th Annual Fine Arts show in Crawfordsville and was named as a finalist in the Decorative Fiber category for the 2007 Niche Awards. Fabe also won an Award of Excellence at Oakbrook, IL Art Show.

Both of the artists' works are part of numerous corporate and private collections.

"We are very, very serious about our gourds," said Fabe.

However, the couple have a lighter side that is apparent in a book they recently published called "Wild Women of Gourdonia." The book features color photographs of some of the many gourd dolls created by Helton.

Named for people they know and have met in various places the book and the dolls are a delight of whimsy, embellished with short biographies of each.

The couple created a land for their dolls that while bringing a smile and even a few laughs among the sisterhood also encourages those who meet them to respect others, do no harm, protect the land, dress outrageously and live life with passion.

Most women can't help but identify with characters like "Diana."

"What a hunter! She can track her prey like a bargain hunter at the mall on Black Friday. Nothing stands in her way to 'getting' it cheap." If there's a bargain to be had, she can sniff it out like a hound on a possum, It's all about the hunt. So, get out of her way," says her biography.

Helton uses the cut outs on big gourds to make the dolls who are embellished with all sorts of colorful beads and wire and found objects.

Fabe started writing the short biographies and posting them next to the dolls at art shows. People liked them so much they compiled them into the book.

The books are available at the couples Serendipity Gourd Art Studio outside Greencastle, at Borders Books in downtown Indianapolis, Barnes and Nobles in Avon, at Cross Cuts Hair Salon (where Fabe gets his hair cut) and at Greencastle's Fine Print Book Store.

In fact the two will be signing books at Fine Print on Oct. 25 at 1 p.m. they will also be at Borders in downtown Indianapolis on Nov. 21 at noon.

"The book is opening a lot of new doors for us," said Helton. Concern with the current economy and possibility of people having fewer dollars to spend are causing the two artists to explore other avenues for their art.

Helton spends a lot of her time teaching classes all over the country. She also has students like a Japanese woman who came to her studio for a three-day intensive session on learning the mixed media art of weaving and carving gourds.

She has created a new product that is a gourd purse. It is practical and beautiful wearable art.

Helton's pieces sell anywhere from \$50 to \$200. Her dolls typically cost between \$78-\$140.

Fabe's art retails for a higher amount between \$375-\$500.

"It takes a lot of time to cultivate, pick, clean, paint and that's before weaving," said Fabe.

Helton's designs are simpler and take a little less time to complete. She spends a lot more of her time teaching these days. In fact she has a class coming up near Geist Reservoir at the Bobby Vance Studio on Oct. 17.

"We've never had any delusions about any major commercial success. We're not na*ve enough to think that. We do this because we love it. It's a lifestyle for us. And, a very conscious choice about our values," said Fabe.

The two also exhibit and sell their art at shows like Penrod t the Indianapolis Art Museum, the Broad Ripple Art Show, Summer Fair, Cincinnati, the Crawfordsville Art Show, and Chautauqua in Madison.

Anyone interested in purchasing their new book "Wild Women of Gourdonia," or viewing their art can visit their studio by appointment (call 765-739-6636) or look online at www.serendipitygourdart.com