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Home Grown Art
Robert Koch Jr.
Photos by Falon Yates

Barbara Cook, proprietor of Home Grown Art in Sheffield, Alabama, is seated on a fuzzy gold sofa, the kind you would find in your eccentric Aunt Zoe's house. The one Aunt Zoe bought in the 1970s, and refused to part with. One look around the shop, and you begin to realize that the whole place kind of reminds you of eccentric Aunt Zoe. I look down into the succulents on a wooden rack to my right. A tiny green Apatosaurus looks back at me from beneath a cactus.

"I'm abstract, out there, and funky," Cook says, and her shop is the proof. A riot of color, texture, and shape, the room where we are seated has geometric paintings in blues, reds, and rainbows on canvas and wood. A door sits on its side in the hall, an abstract painting by local artist Michael Banks. The coffee table before me and the bookcase to my left are covered in beaded bracelet and jewelry displays--bullet casings are a favorite found item in jewelry making—and a sunflower composed of several aluminum cans of varying sizes, painted the purple and gold of the University of North Alabama. Cook graduated from UNA in 2006.

"I majored in interior design," she tells me, "minored in art." Unfortunately, she discovered that there weren't a lot of opportunities for designers in our area or much of a market for abstract art, so she simply did it on the side. For the past five years or so, she salvaged furniture and bits of wood from the curbside, "anything to keep stuff out of the garbage that had potential- sometimes you really have to get creative."

Then came the incident in Opelika.

Really, it was very simple: her mother had an old home there—the house is somewhere between 80 and 100 years old. When she decided to replace some of the damaged hardwood floors, Cook decided that rather than see all that wood go into a landfill, she would bring it home and find a way to repurpose it. Soon after, Cook had a friend request to have a small painting framed; thus began the making of hardwood frames.

"It's strong wood and wasn't taken up gently. Working with 80 plus year old wood wasn't that easy and it wasn't that fun sanding it." She leads me to her desk in the back of this, the first of three rooms. A half dozen paintings of varying size and shape, some clearly hers, some the work of other artists, hang on the wall. This is where upcycling began for Cook. "Upcycling," she says, "is not just repurposing. It's making things more aesthetically pleasing. Stepping it up a couple of notches. I love bringing new life to old things, which some people would consider junk."

Home Grown Art opened in June, 2016, and as of Thanksgiving, twenty artists, plus Cook, display and sell their work in her shop. Work is sold on consignment. As we

tour the three display rooms, it becomes evident that for these artists, anything can become art. One of the artists has cut a wooden pallet and turned into a decorative wine bottle holder with glass storage. A chainsaw chain has been turned into a beautiful but undoubtedly sharp impression of a guitar. Bottle top magnets sits on a display. Bright yellow and orange hand-knitted caps hang from the ceiling. A “Roll Tide” sign has been made from an upcycled piece of slate roof tile, and discarded wood paneling has been cut in the shape of the state and adorned with a white cross, reminiscent of the state flag. Cook is right at home amidst the collection: “Free material and helping our earth? It’s a win-win.”

One of the contributing artists has a clear devotion to mosaics. Shoes, mannequin hands and torsos, skulls, a mirror, a serving platter—each has been adorned with bits of tile, glass, pennies, beads, bottle caps and bits of chain. Sometimes the shapes are random, meant to accent the curves of a woman’s hand, fingernails and bracelets made permanent. Gold outlines the blue stone eyes of a skull, and the broken blue-gray, yellow, and maroon tile adorning it somehow reminds me of Mardi Gras, or Cinco de Mayo. Other times, a specific image is in mind: both the platter and mirror have been given tile inlays in the shape of trees. On the former mirror, a bright yellow sun cuts through lazily clouds to shine over a thick bushy tree—all of it in broken tile. Her pieces, like everyone else’s, are distributed throughout the shop.

Continued exploration reveals something more—the displays themselves are upcycled objects. A former cheese grater is an earring display, the grater painted red to contrast the jewelry. The fragile accordion-like wood trinket shelf that usually finds its way into children’s bedrooms have been hung from the ceiling, and from them colorful little air plants, squids of life and wire have been suspended from bent springs. Two small logs have been propped up for the .38 special earrings and other bullet casing jewelry. Not only were the hardwood floors repurposed for frames, they are also the backdrop and support for each painting on the gallery walls. Bathroom hooks, upcycled chairs and tables, all brought back from the rubbish heap for new life in a joyful visual and tactile menagerie.

Cook says that she wanted to create “a place where artists feel welcome and unique is accepted,” a home for local artists and their unique work. There aren’t a lot of options for local artists, she thinks. She has sold her work at First Fridays in downtown Florence, but has not yet participated in Arts Alive. Her goal, beyond selling works on consignment, is to create a workshop—her space in the back full of everything from furniture and paint to bags of fabric and yarn—and a space where local artists work together and learn from each other

Cook’s shop is part of the community. Beyond providing a venue for the work of local artists, she is also selling prints of local landmarks created by Alabama artist Clay Allison, which have been donated to raise money for the city. But more than this, Cook is contributing to a healthy environment. “It’s important to keep stuff out of the landfill,” she says. “We’ve got to take care of mother earth.”

Home Grown Art is located at 206 E. 3rd St. Sheffield Alabama 35660. Visit them on the web at www.homegrownartisans.com