

Integrating Art Into Life

By Alta Olesen

Many go through life without a purpose. But for local artist Judith Austin, there seems to always have been a purpose and a means.

Austin knew she was an artist at the early age of four when her piece “A Happy Man Admiring his Pansies in his Rock Garden” was accepted at the Corcoran Gallery of Art children’s display of artists.

“Maybe it was a harbinger,” she said of her early start in the art world, “I’ve never been very traditional.”

Since her debut at age four, Austin has never stopped. She recognizes her high school art teacher in helping to get her into Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA. Where she started studying fiber sculpture, something new in the days she attended the University. VCU is now the top sculptural school in the U.S.

“I had great teachers,” she said, leading to her eventually becoming an elementary art teacher. It was always nice to give back.”

But what is fiber sculpture? To Austin, she creates art using any type of fiber media she can. From carpet fibers to yarn to old lined to irregular bike tire frames, Austin sees ordinary items evolving into a masterpiece. What people see as a normal knitted sweater, a rug or a bag is a form of fiber art, she said. But Austin takes it one step further by making her pieces not only 3-D but also interactive.

“I like for (my art) to be participatory,” she said

Before moving to the valley, Austin made an impression around the world. She has received awards and opportunities that not many have been a part of. She was granted an award for using carpet fiber in a 10x 64 foot piece named “Snow White and Assorted Dwarves” by the American Institute of Architecture in an office of the Dupont Corporation in Chicago and in 1984 was appointed into the U.S. Textile Delegation which granted her a six-week visit to china where she learned about China’s culture and art.

Austin has used her creativity in many areas including homes, offices in Chicago and theatres in New York City, Chicago and London. She has also been showcased in many a gallery in Chicago. Her three dimensional and unexpected combinations of materials have caught the eye of many in the way she is not a traditional artist.

“I’m not a realistic artist,” she said of her creative way of bringing different types of fibers together to create a piece.” one of my strong qualities is curiosity.”

In the 90's when the school system was more interested in the "Three Rs," Austin found it hard to find a job as an elementary art teacher so she moved into business. "This is where I learned the whole business aspect," she said claiming that before then she'd emphasized on art.

Eventually, after a time in the business aspect, she became needy of creating art and missed her love of working with children. She started looking on the Internet where she found an opening at Grand Targhee for Kid's Club director. So after talks with human resources at Targhee, Austin picked up and moved to the mountains of Teton Valley. "I was thinking Please get this job, please get this job," she said, and eventually was anted the job and worked in the position for two years.

Since becoming a resident of Teton Valley, Austin thinks that being here has been an inspiration to her. Going on hikes and being involved in the local artist scene has kept her motivated and her ideas flowing.

"The Western Culture agrees with me and my art agrees with the Western Culture," she said of her move to Teton Valley. "I've never lived anywhere like this, it's amazing." She is especially connected with local artists in the area, and feels an importance in collaborating with them.

Besides the connectivity she feels with the Teton Valley art community, she has two other mantras.

In a book she once read, the author explained, "you ache to create." She feels the same. "You almost can't not do it," she said. "You can try to ignore it, but it's still there." She feels that its tough sometimes being an artist because of the vulnerability that one faces. "It's scary because you're revealing yourself," she said

Next Austin practices the Bauhaus theory that art should be in one's life.

That art should be a part of one's daily life and that it should be thought--- provoking and mean something everyday.

"That's a philosophy that I embrace," she said. "I think we all deserve to have art in our lives."

As for the future, Austin has embraced her position in Teton Valley and hopes never to leave and never to stop creating.

"It's just that ache," she explained. "I want to stay here and keep doing art."