

Nature's Jewels

Local Artist Looks to Nature for Inspiration

When a small business person confronts the task of competing against large conglomerates and huge corporations, the power of human creativity can serve as a powerful weapon.

And to harness creativity, one sometimes has to clear the mind of obstacles.

"You have to keep an open mind about your materials," jewelry maker Jenny Bradford said. "You can't get locked into the ideas of materials used for this or that reason."

Bradford fronts a company called

Narcise. The company is a one person show that produces jewelry, bracelets, necklaces and earrings for small shops frequented by those looking for something not offered by retail giants.

Jewelry lovers can currently see some of Bradford's creations at Lost Arts & Antiques, located in the historic Wildey Theatre in Edwardsville.

"The items there represent the earthiest of my work," she said on the Edwardsville exhibit. "It's all very botanical."

When it comes to designing her product, Bradford tends to look to nature, as she uses organic matter: leaves, seed pods, and abalone as physical models for her jewelry. The local jewelry maker places layers of medal over organic objects during construction of the pieces.

Bradford feels the area is receptive when it comes to the home-grown artisan production she does.

"The reception has been fantastic," she said. "One of the things I love about this area is that people are very supportive of the arts. It's a very good place to be an artist."

A jack-of-all-trades, Bradford runs every aspect of her business - from designing her website, contacting shops that might display her work, inventory control, ordering supplies, to tracking sales. Bradford's work shows in shops all over the St. Louis area and the country. Other cities that feature her work are: Portland, Oregon, San Francisco, California, Atlanta, Georgia, Kansas City, Missouri and Louisville, Kentucky.

Bradford's life story is very interesting, as her background includes not only small business and

artistic creation, but also social work and technology. Bradford grew up in St. Charles, Missouri. Creativity runs in the family, as Bradford's parents, Hank and Roni Bradford, were furniture makers in St. Charles. Bradford describes art "as a passion of hers." She took an interest in it when growing up and showed some of her own creations in a youth art exhibitions at the St. Louis Art Museums. It was in those early years that she took an interest in jewelry making.

"I can remember grabbing a soldering iron out of my dad's toolbox and ginning something together like a bracelet," Bradford said.

Growing up around a family furniture making business, Bradford learned that the region has a customer base that appreciates originality.

"I grew up in an upholstery shop," she said. "We dealt with people who were committed to preserving the quality of their furniture and improving upon it and repairing it. It never occurred to me that there wouldn't be a market for the kinds of jewelry that I make."

Although she benefitted from a childhood defined by creativity,



Jenny Bradford fronts a company called Narcise which produces jewelry that is greatly inspired by the organic elements of nature.

Bradford's father still believed his daughter's education ought to include practical lessons.

"When I graduated high school I cut a deal with my dad," she said. "He wanted me to go to business school and he agreed that I could study art for two years and then I would switch to a more lucrative course of study."

Following graduation from St. Charles High School in 1994, Bradford studied sculpture for two years at St. Charles Community College under Gordon Gouldan. After junior

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A set of earrings produced by Narcise.

college Bradford earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Missouri at St. Louis in 1998. While majoring in psychology Bradford also took business courses. She admits there was a benefit to blending her interest in art with a more practical course of study.

"My dad was right because I use what I learned in my business courses every day," she said.

After graduating college she moved to San Francisco and within weeks was working as an independent software writer. During those years Bradford didn't have a creative outlet, but she experienced the Bay Area's commitment to the arts.

"I saw a ton of great art and I saw what a public commitment to art looks like," she said. "But I was very wrapped up in the .com scene at the time."

The jewelry maker returned home in 2001 after the technology boom collapsed. Bradford started sculpting again and also worked as a social worker at the Juvenile Center for Autism in Olivette, Missouri.

"I worked with people who were non-verbal and I looked for creative media, a way for these people to express themselves," she said. "It made me look at the materials around me and how they can be used in different ways."

Bradford produces 100 pieces for each line of jewelry she rolls out. She has six different lines currently active at this time. A true artisan, once Bradford introduces a line she rarely revisits it or tries to recreate it.

"I want people to associate my brand with an always updating rotation of fresh jewelry," she said.

The creative process starts with a design on a sketchbook. Although she refuses to recreate old lines, Bradford said it's not uncommon for her to revisit old ideas in a sketch that's three years old. It usually takes her a week to craft a prototype of a line of jewelry. Then it takes roughly four weeks to handcraft a line for consumption.

"The creative seed starts with my permission to step outside the process and work at things in a dif-

ferent way," she said. "My process is really, really recursive when it comes to designing and fabricating jewelry. A set of pieces isn't done until it's shipped and out of my hands. I'm always revisiting concepts and it's not really so different

than software development. It's a reiterative process. You're always returning to the core of what you started to refine, rebuild, and

reimagine. So, I really don't see this as different at all."

You can meet Bradford in person and view her work on Saturday, January 14 from 3-6 p.m., at an Artist Reception held at Lost Arts & Antiques, 254 N. Main Street in Edwardsville. Bradford's current offerings will be on display.

For more information about Bradford and her designs, visit www.narcise.net.



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