Kristin Castenschiold - Dogs from the Heart

by Pam North

Kristin Castenschiold's love of animals stems from her childhood, and that passion eventually evolved into her own business, *Heart “Felt” Canines*. A Christmas tree farm that has been in her family for generations is still her home, which she shares with her husband and beloved pets in northern New Jersey. She is wholeheartedly a dog lover. Starting with the puppies raised at the farm for the Seeing Eye Organization as guide dogs when she was young, she fondly remembers the German Shepherds, Labrador Retrievers, and Golden Retrievers, and embraces them all in her art. Her mother, Martha, who shares Kristin's love for animals, introduced her to needle-felting (the art of compacting wool with a barbed needle to allow it to be sculptured), and she began creating miniature dogs. The needle-felting allowed her to create the detail needed for realism, and she was hooked. As a mother-daughter team, *Heart “Felt” Canines* was born. Combining their talents, the pair jumped enthusiastically into their new enterprise. While Martha focuses mainly on needle-felting and sculpting, Kristin works a little differently. “With the needle-felting background, I already knew a bit about working with wool; however, I have an entirely different process, involving gluing the wool onto a base. I really enjoy working with and learning about various fibers from sheep, alpacas, rabbits, and even dog and cat hair that a dog groomer friend kindly saves for me. The process of taking the sheared fibers, and washing, carding, blending, and combing them, is very rewarding, especially when I see the completed piece. Each creation is completely different, and before I start, I spend the time carefully researching which fibers are most appropriate. I select the fibers specifically for each little dog, blending the colors to achieve the effect I want. I have learned a lot about fibers, and how to combine them to get the desired coat texture and color. It's rewarding to sculpt a figure and fur it with natural wool .” Her inspiration comes from her love of art, photography, and animals. She grew up painting, drawing, and taking pictures, and got her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at Kutztown University, but always was torn about what she wanted to do as a career. Last year she finally took the leap and started her own business, combining her love of miniatures, photography, and selling on eBay. “To me, the miniatures combine all the things I love to do. I get to study animals, sketch them, recreate them to look as realistic as possible, then finish each project with some creative photography. While growing up I was enthralled with Hollywood dogs such as Lassie, Rin Tin Tin, Toto, and 101 Dalmatians. An ongoing project of mine has been recreating many of these famous dogs in dollhouse scale, and photographing them in scenes related to the TV shows and movies. The endless list of great animals will keep me busy for years to come. I hope to create a photo book of all my celebrity creations. I also accept commissions, and take time to create whatever animal catches my attention. With so many breeds and mixes of dogs, I don’t think I ever will be lacking in ideas and subjects.”  
Her whole family has supported her, allowing her the freedom to pursue a career she loves. “It is fairly easy combining home life and miniature life. I spend my days in the studio creating and doing my photography work, and I work on the miniatures at night. My supplies have taken over our sunroom, with wool and props for pictures stored all over the house!”  
She sells her products on Etsy, Ebay, and at a local dollhouse shop. “The Dollhouse Factory in Lebanon NJ has been wonderful with helping me get my name out, and displaying/selling my pieces in the store and at local miniature shows. I hope to start doing more shows over the next year. My prices range from $150-$300 depending on size, complexity of coat, and markings.”  
She enjoys combining her art with her travels. “I am honored to say my pieces have ended up all over the world, and when I travel I always bring a miniature with me. On a recent trip to Italy I brought two pups I had made, and photographed them at all the landmarks we visited. They recorded the story of our trip through Instagram and Facebook, and later went to new homes with a story to tell. I have met some wonderful collectors around the world through Etsy and eBay, and I alway love to see pictures of my pups in their new homes.”   
“I love the details that go into miniatures on such a small scale. One of the biggest challenges is being able to envision a dog without its coat as I am going through the sculpting process, because I need to make allowances for the layering of fur. Scale also can be tricky when it comes to sculpting and allowing for the addition of fur.”

She is not teaching any workshops yet, but plans to keep perfecting her skills and possibly conduct workshops in the future.

Castenschiold sees a great future for miniatures. “I think miniatures always will have its niche. Any art field that has such talent will always have a place in people's hearts.”