Michael Reynolds - Miniaturist Extraordinaire

by Pam North

Georgia born and bred Michael Reynolds has a philosophy that has driven his life: “ I channel adversity into success.”

His childhood wasn't an easy one. He reminisced, “As a kid I was a little goofy nerd, more interested in a blank sheet of paper and a large box of crayons than typical stuff liked by my peers, who perceived my interests as odd. As a result, I was bullied, but that experience gave me the survival skills I would need much later in life. I was left isolated in the mind of a creative adolescent. I could make my world bearable by using my imagination to escape to a much kinder world where animals talked, and every day was spent with fairies, princes, and castles furnished with lovely things and with protective walls. In hindsight, I now understand that it gave me the cushion to the reality of the world that I so desperately needed then. ”

 He became interested in miniatures in the late 70s, when his mother's neighbor built a dollhouse, and soon he built one for his mother, beginning his journey into a fanciful world where anything was possible. “As a teenager I was interested in becoming an architect. I was diagnosed with dyslexia and struggled in school; my learning disability manifested itself most notably with numbers. It was an impossibility for me to become an architect, but miniatures afforded me the possibility to live out that dream, and figure things out in my own way. I am very organic in my creative process. Like many people who are dyslexic, if I can visualize it first, I can execute it from start to finish. I never draw a piece first. I simply lay out the challenge in my mind, and calculate all the possible ways to make the piece. After it is visualized start to finish, I get to work. I often get an idea to create a piece that I have no idea of how to engineer in miniature.”

 He also began working for a local miniatures shop part-time, but after four years, the shop closed because of a downturn in the economy, and Reynolds began to seek his own place in the world. He spent some time abroad, exposed to diverse cultures in wonderful locales that echoed those he had imagined as an adolescent. “I eventually landed in the historic city of Charleston S.C., where I felt the connection with history I had discovered in Europe. I fell in love with the theater, eventually becoming a costume designer, an award-winning career that lasted for 20 successful years. I understand how the artist uses his mind to deliver creations that are uniquely his own.”
Reynolds then decided to seek a new adventure, and reentered the field of dollhouse miniatures, coming full circle. “I channel my rich life of experiences into my work today. I make no claim of being a craftsman of perfect reproduction in-scale furniture, and I am not a formally trained artist or painter. I simply create and bring to life the things that lie in the recesses of my mind. I have revisited a passion I had discovered as a child, a passion I thought I had left behind, but on which I obviously have never truly shut the door; I simply keep turning the page. In the miniature world everyone has a valued story to tell. It can live in a dollhouse, a simple room box, or rest delicately under a glass dome, but it is real and it exists.”
Reynolds has devised his own unique techniques. “I spent two years studying in depth many of da Vinci's techniques. I paint on actual stretched canvas, creating a layered technique similar to what da Vinci is believed to have used. I want my finished products to have a resonant depth to them that look like aged paintings.” His craftings also include fancifully dressed dolls (an homage to his theater days), animals, and amazingly intricate furniture. “If I am known for anything in the area of furniture, it is my use of exotic burl woods. I finish my pieces to make them look like they have been sitting in a house for over a hundred years. I use so many exotic woods that I found it difficult to match my carved components with the imported wood veneers that I prefer. I taught myself how to cast components, but my dilemma was that casting in resins resulted in plastic-looking elements. I began researching ancient Italian woodworking compounds that used ground pecan shells and an assortment of glues. Pecan is a very hard wood, so my solution was to grind pecan shells into a flour consistency and infuse resin. The result was a component that is porous and stainable like wood. Most of my pieces are combinations of hardwood, veneers, and cast components.”
He is into miniatures full-time. “This is what I do for a career. I am a working artist, and devote every hour of every day to my craft. My ongoing challenge has always been to solve the puzzle. By education I have all the classic studies under my belt, but I have never been classically trained in the arts.”
Reynolds shared his sources of inspiration. “Simply being alive inspires me. I nearly died in my youth, so every day I have now I embrace and count myself grateful for it. Most often my ideas come to me in dreams, then morph over time. I always have half-baked pieces sitting in boxes and drawers all over the house. Most of my pieces come to mind quickly, but there are times when I get blocked halfway through the process. I don't push it; I just set it aside until a solution presents itself. The hardest part about making miniatures is that I have too many ideas and too few hours in the day. I am most driven by the challenge to create something I have never seen before. My recent most difficult challenge was a spiral staircase. I decided not long ago that I had never seen in miniature a free-standing spiral staircase, one with no center pole support, like one in a historic house in Charleston. The challenge was how to engineer 'plumb' and 'level'. As a further complication, I wanted to veneer the piece in exotic burl wood, and had to figure out how to bend a substantial hand rail. After months of trial and error, the process reached happy completion. I have fun with all my little pieces.”
Reynolds said he sells everything he makes, because he has no room to collect. He loves the creative process itself, and savors the reward of knowing collectors have acquired his work because they like it. His prices range from a single furniture piece at $110 to a commissioned room for $20,000.
He currently is working on a 3-story room he calls the *Philosopher's Library,* a culmination of all the techniques he has developed over the past eight years. He also will be teaching the construction of a Tudor room June of 2017. The room was inspired by a room in a novel he has been writing for the past few years, and the room even has a secret "priest hole" found in estate homes throughout Great Britain.
“It's difficult for me to suggest which pieces are my best, as I work in so many mediums within this niche. I prefer to let the observer do the choosing. Frankly, I am very insecure about my work. I just feel blessed that there are collectors who acquire my pieces because they like them. They are my angels who allow me to pursue what I so love doing.”
Reynolds currently lives in a one-bedroom condominium in a historic building in the midtown area of Atlanta. “My cat Pippin is my business partner,” he joked.

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