The Wondrous World of LuLu Tatum

by Pam North

It would be fun to live for a week in LuLu Tatum's mind, just to see what's waiting to get out! When it seems that she could not possibly top her last doll creation, somehow she manages to do so, introducing still another enchanting surprise from her last foray into her endless world of ingenuity. Beguiling children; pensive old folk; quirky characters from assemblages of found objects; waggish gnomes and sprites; all spring from the fertile wonderland in her head to inhabit the real world, bringing it joy with their engaging personalities.

Despite the wide variety of themes in Tatum's dolls, and the uniqueness each conveys, somehow it's easy to spot her signature essence in each, and to tie all her pieces together into a meshing montage of styles that are sublimely hers. The element of surprise is always the refreshing spark. Just when she has established a bit of a trend in one direction, off she darts in another, delivering a whimsical creation of a totally different genre. Her artistry shines its beam through them all. She nicely navigates a delicate balancing act between fantasy and reality, handling caricature and realism with equal finesse. Each character reflects soulful humanity intersecting with fairy dust.

Defining some of this process, she said, “Almost every character I create, comes from long ago or far away. As far back as I can remember, I always have believed in faerie tales, and I'm pretty sure I still do. I was so fascinated with beloved characters like Tinkerbell, Peter Pan, Snow White - well, all of them. When I was a little girl I often could be found in a peaceful place, usually with my dog or a doll, lost in my imagination. If I wasn't up in a tree, I would be lying very still under one, waiting for the possibility of a glimpse of the Little People, whom I hoped might come out of hiding from a time gone by, emerging from under a leaf, crawling out of a doodle bug hole, or peeking around a tiny door in a tree. That never really happened, of course, except in my fantasies. Little did I know then, however, that someday, when I grew up, I would be so blessed that I could actually create my very own Little People and Critters. Faerie tales do come true for me!"

Tatum draws from endless avenues of inspiration – music, nature, philosophy, folklore, and “even dreams and clouds,” she remarked. From those inventive wanderings, she deftly sculpts Cernit clay into faces, hands, feet, and even shoes. Glass eyes; wigs of human hair, curly lamb, Tibetan lamb, fur, or even musk ox; and wire-armatured and padded bodies covered in fabric; all combine into little people that come alive with personality plus. Whimsical caricatures and fantasy faeries are some of her most captivating creations, and after seeing her impish sprites and droll gnomes, one easily can begin to believe that all those elven entities really do exist after all!

She is equally adept in her more realistic portrait dolls. Expressing ethnicity is something that has great appeal to her, and she manifests her artistry in lifelike portraits of people of various ages. “I am personally a mix of Native-American, Irish, and English,” she explained, “and I always have been fascinated with all of the different cultures in our world, with each ethnic group having its own special beauty. Besides their cultures, I think it's the wide range of skin tones that I love to work with the most. When I start a new work of art, I know exactly how I want it to look. I want its finished appearance to convey the impression that it was captured in someone's candid photo. I also want all of my characters to look as if they're happy with who they are. I've made them with so many different expressions conveying moods and emotions - happy, serious, silly, uncertain, inquisitive, and thoughtful. I don't ever make them look fearful, lost, or sad; I want them to seem contented in that frozen moment in which they have been caught, That way, wherever they go to live, they will bring pleasure.” Her ethnic dolls have encompassed Afro-American, Hispanic, European, Asian, Native American, and Indian, and she accents them all with vintage textiles and appropriate accessories that reflect their culture. She is totally committed to detail, and pays special attention to their eyes, managing somehow to capture the soul of each doll. “There is something of myself in each of my creations. I put very long lifelines in the hands of my dolls, and for almost four years now, I also have been putting a spiral into the palm of their right hands, because I have one in my palm.”

Tatum admitted that she has been an artist as far back as she can remember, working professionally since 1989. Her creations are not limited to dolls, but also encompass bears and animals, all one-of-a-kind; even though she might repeat a design for a request, each will be unique unto itself, unmistakably different from any other before. She also paints in oils, water colors, and mixed media; with some available as limited edition prints. Then there's the extreme primitives; clothing, and jewelry designs. It's possible she sometimes sleeps.

. All this talent and hard work has brought her many awards, and her work has been featured in many shows, shops, and publications in the United States and abroad. Many of her pieces are in collections of well-known celebrities, personalities, and politicians. She divides her time between living in Tucson AZ, upstate NY, and New Mexico.

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