Political “Bearings”

by Pam North

If watching political confrontations lately is driving you “bearzerk”, and you're feeling a little “grizzly” over the “polar”ization of parties and platforms, and if everything you're hearing from the candidates sounds like “Pooh”, it's time to “paws” for an injection of some long-overdue, bear-themed levity into the mix. To help you lighten up and “bear” all the “panda”monium, try entering the imaginative bubble where politics provoke only smiles instead of frustration. Experience LuLu Tatum's delightful bear parade of political caricatures, in what might be dubbed the Republicartoon and Democomical parties, that perfectly spoof their human counterparts. Real politics should be this much fun.

Tatum began making her political bears in 2008. Her grandson, Theo, had suggested to her that she should make a bear character to celebrate America's first African-American president. She accepted the challenge, creating Bearack Obama, who has real presidential “bear”ing, More characters followed, all with personalities that are unmistakably recognizable and endearingly amusing. Bearnie Sanders oozes curmudgeonly nebbishness. Joe Bearden, John McCain, Hillary and Bill Clinton, Donald Trump, Sarah Palin, Martin Luther King Jr., and Abraham Lincoln are all represented in droll and waggish versions. An additional. more generally politically-themed, character, called *Get Out the Vote,* won Tatum a 1st place award at the Teddy Bear Artist Invitational in 2012.

Tatum's unique style of creating bears begins with a polymer clay skull framework, over which she expertly applies and manipulates a thin layer of leather, suede, or mohair in the facial area, defining curves and wrinkles to give each bear a distinct and whimsical personality. Glass eyes of appropriate size are added, rendering sparkle and life to each bear's impish expression. Sculptured noses, and sometimes teeth and tongues, are added. The bodies, limbs, and heads are made of quality mohair, and paws have sculpted leather pads. The bodies are jointed to allow for sitting or standing poses. She works in various sizes; the political bears range from 15” to 18”. All are one-of-a-kind, and all costumes are appropriate to the character, and handmade by her. Each of her sculpted items is signed, dated, and comes with a certificate of authenticity. No one can have just one of her bears; they quickly become an addiction.

Tatum's artistic leanings were encouraged by her family from her childhood. Her father was a silversmith, and her mother and her two grandmothers patiently taught her to sew. Found objects from “treasure hunts” were studied for possibilities, and then turned into imaginative artistic projects. Creativity was encouraged.

She made her first bear from faux fur in 1961, but didn't develop her distinctive sculptured faces for them until the 1990s. She named them LuLu Bears. Asked about what inspired her innovative approach, she explained, “I had made so many bears from the 1960's on, but I knew I could find a better way to put more expression into their faces. I wanted to show emotions, and that way I could just go crazy with many new characters, including male and female. That's when I decided to try a special sculpted look with my bears (I already had been making dolls), and so I made my first sculpted skeleton, over which I could shape and manipulate leather, enabling me to create laugh lines, frowns, wrinkles, all the details that allow endless expressive variations. In the process, the bears themselves often tell me how they want to look. I am inspired continuously with ideas for future bears, and I will create them for as long as I'm able. I absolutely love them all.”

Tatum's creations are not limited to bears and animals. She also makes original and OOAK sculpted dolls; original paintings in water color, oil, and mixed media; limited edition prints;  
extreme primitives; clothing and jewelry designs. Tatum elaborated, “I have been an artist pretty much as far back as I can remember, professionally since 1989. I have done many, many shows featuring my paintings, bears, and dolls. My work has been shown in many shops, in the USA and abroad, and also has been featured in many magazines and books, including international issues. My pieces are in collections in many countries, and I have sold many pieces to well-known celebrities and politicians. I also have won many awards for my work.” Tatum is highly original and prolific in the scope of her creativity, and constantly delivers new surprises that collectors snap up with relish. She divides her time between living in Tucson AZ, upstate NY, and New Mexico.

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Blog and website are both works in progress