Uplifting Dolls From Down Under – The Artistry of Kaye Wiggs

by Pam North

They are winsome waifs whose soulful expressions tug at the heart. They seem less like dolls to be purchased, but rather like precious little people to be adopted and cherished. They all ooze personality-plus, and they all are the delightful creations of Kaye Wiggs, an Australian artist who has worked at her craft and perfected her skills until she has become one of the most talented creators in the doll world.  
 Kaye was born on a farm in Quirindi, New South Wales, Australia. “We were quite poor when I was a child, and we had to live on the produce and livestock from our farm,” she reminisced. “I loved farm life, and even now I do not like living in a town or city. I feel claustrophobic in town.”

Her artistic leanings go 'way back. “I always have been a tinkerer, and when I was a child I loved taking things apart to see how they worked. This was not always appreciated by my parents, because what I pulled apart often never worked again! I do think that my inquiring mind has been a benefit to me with my doll making, and has helped me to learn to make molds and do casting. I have had no formal education in the arts, and have always been self-taught. I do have plenty of determination, and when I want to do something, I just keep at it until I figure it out. I did oil painting and pencil drawing in my teenage years, and I have tried most crafty things. I've always enjoyed creating things. I love photography, knitting, sewing, painting, drawing, and sculpting, so doll making is the perfect outlet for me, as it incorporates many of those things.”

Interest in dolls likewise was reflected in her early years. “Dolls always were a fascination for me, and I remember making them from wooden clothes pegs as a child. I used to draw faces on the pegs, and glue or stitch fabric to the pegs for clothes. I remember getting paper dolls for one Christmas; they were named Nora and Tilly, and they came in little books with cut-out clothing. I loved those so much! One year, my grandmother (we called her Nanna Essie) dressed a doll for me herself, so it came with a couple of sets of clothing. That was my first 'real' doll.”

“I have been making dolls for over 25 years now. I started by making soft sculpture dolls and clowns for my daughter when she was little, and my friends saw them and wanted them for their girls, too. In fact, one of my friends recently told me that the doll I had made for her daughter has been passed down to her granddaughter, and is much loved. Eventually, in about 1988, I decided to make reproduction porcelain dolls. I did that for a short time, and then the next year I decided that I wanted to sculpt my own dolls. I thought my first sculpt was awful, but others seem to like it, so I entered it in a doll competition at one of the doll shows in the city. To my utter shock, I won first place in the original dolls category. However, my doll was one of only two entered in that section, so the judges didn't have much to choose from,” she said laughingly. “After making a few different original dolls and selling them at various doll shows, I was 'discovered' by an Australian company that made and sold molds of dolls for reproduction, and I worked with them for a number of years. They sold the molds of my dolls in the U.S., under the name of 'Dolls From Down Under'. Later, I designed dolls for WenBar Molds, an American company. They also represented me for Home Shopping Network, and I designed dolls for HSN for a number of years as well.”

Life then presented challenges for Kaye. “After many years of making dolls, I became ill, and couldn't work for a couple of years. Then I saw a ball-jointed doll (BJD) in a magazine, and I fell in love! I immediately decided to try to make resin dolls, so I spent two years researching the process, testing resin, learning to make the molds, and doing the casting. I started making the resin BJDs in about 2004. I made a number of dolls, hand-casting and hand-painting them myself, until I became allergic to the resin. I was about to retire again when I met Grace Szczepaniec, from JpopDolls.net, and we decided to try having my dolls factory made, with her as my distributor. She and I have been working together for many years, with a great business partnership and friendship. I hate repeating the same doll too many times, so having my dolls factory-produced is ideal for me.”

Kaye uses Smooth-On resin for her own castings, with a UV stabilizer added to protect her dolls from yellowing. “I think the factory uses the same resin as I do, but I am not positive,” she states. Her dolls are usually in the 11-inch to 24-inch size range. She uses solid glass eyes; the wigs are generally from JpopdDolls and sometimes Monique. She occasionally makes her own wigs from Tibetan lamb skins. Her pre-order dolls come undressed, but she does occasionally offer some hand-painted and fully dressed dolls in outfits usually made of antique lace and vintage fabrics. If she uses any modern fabric, it is usually cotton or silk. Kaye loves working in resin. “Resin is less restricting than porcelain. I love to make dolls in different skin tones. I like resin BJDs because I can customize them. It's as if I can be a child again, and play with my dolls!”

Kaye professed to not being able to put her finger on her inspiration. “To be honest, I really don't know how I create my dolls. They just seem to evolve from the piece of clay. I believe it's something that anyone who has any creative ability can do, if they just work at it. If I can do it, anyone can! When my kids were young, and I tried to craft things from Play-Doh for them, I was hopeless at sculpting even basic shapes! It's an evolution.”

Kaye has won a number of awards over the years, and this year she was given a Lifetime Achievement Award, sponsored by Dolls magazine. “That was such a thrill, and one of the highlights of my career,” she said. “The other highlight was having one of my dolls on an Australian stamp back in 1997.”

When asked about her future plans, Kaye replied, “I have lots of ideas for dolls, but probably never will get to all of them! I get frustrated with myself because I can't work as fast as I would like, and I usually have more than one doll happening at a time, so sometimes I get a bit scattered. My house is always a mess, with dolly bits everywhere! For the moment I am continuing to offer my dolls through JpopDolls, but I am getting older and have some health problems, so I'm hoping to semi-retire sometime in the next couple of years to just make very small editions and one-of-a-kinds myself. I am also planning to offer hand-painted and fully dressed dolls, and am presently accepting names for my mailing list, so if anyone would like to be included they can email me at [kazekids@hotmail.com](mailto:kazekids@hotmail.com). I don't have a webpage. I sell my dolls through [https://www.jpopdolls.net](https://www.jpopdolls.net/), or from my mailing list.

The doll world eagerly awaits Kaye's new creations.