

ARTISTS

An Accidental Artist

Susan Brady relies on chance in art and life.

By Mary Corbin

You might say Susan Brady is an accidental artist. Growing up in the small town of Lexington, Va., she had no formal art training but enjoyed drawing, painting, and making things. Both of her parents were creative, her mother with textiles and her dad with woodworking, passing along their skills to their daughter. "It is hard to say why I became an artist," Brady said. "I have always looked at the world and made things. I didn't so much become an artist as have other interests fall away."

Brady did study art at Barton College in North Carolina but graduate studies in architecture at Virginia Polytechnic Institute defined her career path. Moving to California for her new husband's work soon after graduation, they settled first in Marin County, moved to Berkeley in 1991, and landed in El Cerrito in 1998. Having since given up her architecture practice, Brady splits her time between

her home and studio in El Cerrito overlooking Wildcat Canyon Regional Park and an old house in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.

Picking up where she left as an undergrad, Brady let her work as an artist evolve over time through private classes she took around the Bay Area. She named several local teachers for inspiring her over the years, including Berkeley artist Laura Raboff, Barbara Morris in West Marin, and Sonoma watercolorist Susan Cornelis, though she said her influences are too many to count. Her subject matter is driven by everyday things: nature, discarded/ found items, architecture, and the weather. "I rely on chance both in my artwork and in my life. I like to collect things. And I strive to be hopeful," she said. Brady is also inspired by her artist friends, in particular their dedication, technique and the work they produce.

Her materials coalesce from the more traditional wood, paper, and metal to disparate matter like thumbtacks, nails, pearls, and in one piece, a hairnet. She even uses rust as an integrated material, making a solution with vinegar, water, and small iron bits left in a glass jar for a time. "Sometimes I rinse steel wool in vinegar. When it rusts, I crumble it onto paper or fabric that has been dampened with a vinegar and water mixture. Other times, I wrap fabric around pieces of iron, tie the bundle with string, and either boil or dampen it in vinegar water, put it in a plastic bag, and leave in the sun to create an effect with rust," Brady said.

A passion for horseback riding is reflected in many mixed-media assemblages and textile pieces.

Equine sculptures, that range in size from 7 inches high to over 6 feet tall, are perhaps her most intriguing work; the use of found materials such as remnants of a paintbrush, fishing rod, or a folding ruler bring each piece uniquely and anthropomorphically to life. In other work, titles like *Got Out Just in Time*, *Thought Flutter*, *Flung*, and *That Amnesia Time*, suggest a level of introspection on the ephemeral moments of life.

Brady exhibits widely around the Bay Area and across the country. She's currently working on a stitching project involving an old wool blanket and cheesecloth and recently participated in Inktober, a 31-day drawing challenge for artists held every October. "I also have some altered book projects in the planning stages, including a stitched book, and as always, another horse assemblage," Brady said. Her most recent exhibits were *Something Blue* at Gray Loft Gallery in Oakland, *Coupled* at Rhythmic Cultural Center in Alameda, and a show in Buena Vista, Va., in conjunction with the Mountain Day Festival. She will be part of the *Love Our Island Art Walk* on April 12 in Alameda.

Apart from being an artist, Brady is married to a photographer and is mother to a grown daughter. Along with riding horses, she enjoys gardening and making functional things. She is also on a decades-long attempt to learn to play the banjo.

For more information, visit her website at SusanBradyStudio.us.

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