

MAKING HER MARK: THE ART OF HOLLIE TAYLOR

by ELIZABETH OLIVER

When most people realize they've left the house without their left earring, they'll take out the right one to leave both ears bare, yet matching.

Not artist Hollie Taylor, who on a recent afternoon just laughs at the realization and leaves the glittery, multicolored earring hanging from her right earlobe. Perhaps it is better, after all, to bring a little color into the world around you when you get the chance.

That sense of humor and whimsy often extends from the artist to her art, whether Taylor is working on her Tobacco Barn Spirit Houses, Wall Niche Artifacts, or Altars—all handbuilt from clay, adorned with stamps, and crafted to look ancient and worldly.

The Tobacco Barn Spirit Houses, which the artist more precisely describes as Mad Hatter Tobacco Barns, take the beautiful yet haunting image of those barns so indelible to the Southern landscape and give them a fanciful twist. Each has a doorway opening in the front and back and small windows at the peak of the roof, all features faithful to actual tobacco barns, but they could also be yellow or pale green, with images imprinted among the stamped indentations representing kudzu vines. Kokopelli plays his flute on the side of one barn, while on another a turtle carries a tree on his back. "It's lighthearted and fun," Taylor says of these designs. Some of the barns are dark brown and more realistic, and most of them also have a worn look, spots where the shiny glaze looks rubbed off.

"That's what's interesting to me about the tobacco barns," Taylor says. "They're weathered. They're sort of falling down but they're still standing. I'm most interested in the ones that are leaning." She shares that with her mother, Brooke Taylor, who painted realistic, detailed watercolors of tobacco barns. "She painted the ones that were leaning," Taylor says. "She thought that was very interesting. We're kind of together on that."

But Taylor, a North Carolina native and longtime Chapel Hill resident, has artistic interests that reach far beyond her homeland. Her work is often popu-



Southern tobacco barns inspire Hollie Taylor's Tobacco Barn Spirit Houses.

lated with icons from other cultures, including Zuni carvings, Mali cosmic eggs, and the Hand of Fatima. "I'm interested in exploring things that are important to people, spiritual connections," she says. "I traveled to Africa and Europe. I'm very interested in different belief systems and the images that go along with



Taylor's Altars and Wall Niche Artifacts often feature icons and look like they're part of an anthropological excavation.

them. I like to use, look at, appreciate things that people believe have a lot of meaning.”

While this is at work in the Tobacco Barn Spirit Houses to an extent (spirit houses originated in Thailand as outdoor shrines meant to protect those in the homes and businesses nearby), it is perhaps most evident in Taylor's Wall Niche Artifacts, which prominently display Buddha faces or other icons inside heavily textured clay frames. The pieces hang on the wall and are made to look ancient, as if part of an anthropological excavation.

“I want them to look like they've been dug up out of the earth, like artifacts from a previous culture,” Taylor says of her work. “I've always liked really old, old things, and how through time things get worn. I'm interested in that and the human interaction with things, like with rosary beads, how people wear them down.”

Taylor achieves this aged look by applying a black underglaze to the pieces and wiping it off the surface, “much as you would wipe an etching plate clean,” she explains. “Then, I paint on transparent low-fire glazes that show the dark underglaze remaining in the crevices underneath,” Taylor adds. “The layering adds an interesting dimension to the low-fire palette. I

do the wiping on purpose to make my work look old. I really think that old look is very groovy.”

This affinity for the old also extends to the materials Taylor uses to create her pieces. While she uses stamps she makes herself and those she finds online, Taylor also uses wooden stamps from India past their prime for making batik fabrics but still well suited for creating intricate textures in clay. “I like them because they're worn and old,” she says.

Far from worn and old herself, Taylor admits that this fascination with age began in childhood. “When I was a kid, I always wanted to have wrinkles,” she says with a laugh and explains that she would wrinkle her forehead in an attempt to speed her own facial aging process. “I've always liked old things,” she says. “I value them more.”

She says that her early infatuation with wrinkles also spoke to her lifelong love of texture, a fascination that has presented itself throughout her artistic career. Taylor studied painting and printmaking at UNC-Chapel Hill and received an MFA from the University of Georgia in printmaking. After years of printing on paper, she concentrated on printing tiles before moving to her current clay-

work six years ago. Just as artists from ancient cultures did before the advent of paper, Taylor houses her ideas in clay, a longer-lasting medium. “It's almost like the print has become three-dimensional to me,” she says of the change. “It's like the paper has gotten thicker.”

Taylor counts among her influences the often-anonymous artists who make the cultural icons found in her work. “They're just regular people right out of the culture,” she says. “I'm very influenced by what they've made and I like to include their work in my work.” She also cites artist Lana Wilson as an influence in her claywork. Wilson's work is also textured, though it often incorporates symbols from the hobo signage system used in the United States in the 1930s.

Taylor sees her love of texture as a reflection of her love of nature. “Something about these rhythms is very compelling to me,” she says of working with stamps to create texture in clay. “Like in nature, for example at the beach, there's this rhythm. I think there's something that humans need—they need a rhythm, they need a ritual, they need a pattern.”

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