

Artist in emerging Chattanooga arts district creates sculptures from castaways

By Linda Lange

CHATTANOOGA — It was one of those crazy ideas that never ran into a wall.

John Petrey used bottle caps and playing cards to create a dress sculpture. He took asphalt shingles and copper sheeting to build another garment. Yard sticks, twigs and barn wood came next.

The sculptures are an artistic take of the 1960s shirtwaist dress. "I do them purposely in a vintage look because when people look at them, young and old, it reminds them of better times. Women constantly comment to me about 'Oh, I remember that era,' and they remember it fondly," says Petrey during an interview at his studio.

He and his wife, Peggy, relocated from Orlando, Fla., after buying a commercial building at 559 E. Main St. in downtown Chattanooga. They live in what used to be the front office. His studio - called "the man cave" - fills the back.

"We've had this influx of artists into the Main Street Arts District," says Petrey, noting that his neighbors are painters Rey and Patricia Alfonso who came here from the Seattle area by way of San Francisco. The couples have joined in the redevelopment of a once-rundown area broadly known as the Historic Southside. "Five to 10 years ago there were crack houses and prostitution here," he says.

All that's changing as buildings enter rehab, sidewalks sprout trees and flower boxes, and shopkeepers open their doors. Amid the din of jackhammers and dump trucks, people feel the energy of this eclectic area. Businessmen and women are taking a chance that the Main Street Arts District will become as successful as the city's highly acclaimed Bluff View Art District. The Historic Southside boasts 12 studios and galleries, 13 fashion and gift shops, and 21 eateries, ranging from the high-end St. John's Restaurant to the convivial Bluegrass Grill.

"Chattanooga is a happening place, especially downtown. It's hopping. There's so much to do. The positives are absolutely amazing," he says.

With their building purchase in 2006, the Petreys transitioned into artists/entrepreneurs. Petrey was a commercial photographer working on large national accounts like Pepsi, Red Lobster and Arby's. He is a graduate of the Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, Calif. She owns a graphic design business focused on textbook production, but is positioned to dive deeply into crafting jewelry, pottery and two-dimensional collages. "We were ready for a change. We wanted to simplify. We wanted to work on our art," says Petrey, 50.

A conversation with his mother sparked the sculpted dresses. "I was raised as an only child in Southern California. My mom ran a beauty salon. After school, I would walk to the salon and watch a lot of TV until it was time to go home." He tuned in to the make-believe, happy world of "Ozzie and Harriet," "Father Knows Best" and "Leave it to Beaver."

"It didn't matter what problem they had, it was solved in 30 minutes," notes Petrey, the words tumbling out of him in paragraphs, coherent and colorful. "Here we were in the '60s, the Vietnam War is going on, there's a drug culture, but on TV, everything's perfect."

(continued)



Linda Lange

With verve and brio, artist John Petrey creates sculptures at his studio in Chattanooga's Main Street Arts District. He takes cues from the golden years of television and creates dresses that are sexy, fun and sophisticated. His latest project, a life-size rhino, hovers in the background.



John Petrey

Chattanooga artist John Petrey's critical examination of 1960s American pop culture led to the creation of bottle cap-encrusted "Doris Day."

Keeping in mind the TV sitcom's "dress-with-pearls" look, Petrey began sculpting his version using alternative materials. "I was not going to make dresses out of fabric. That had already been done."

Actresses Donna Reed and Doris Day didn't have this unconventional attire in their closets. Instead of floral cottons and organza, these dress sculptures are created of pressed tin, yardsticks, poker chips, house siding and old letters from gas station signs. He combs flea markets and junk stores for forlorn, yet interesting, detritus. "I'm constantly searching for materials. And I need huge quantities," says Petrey, noting that he had just ordered 20,000 blue bottle caps. Greg Ross, his friend in the salvage business, located 20,000 size tags for shoes in a building targeted by a wrecking ball.

"It's all about creating texture and shape, flow and whimsy. You can't keep someone from touching these dresses because they are appealing to multiple senses." Viewers are amused and intrigued by their playful eccentricity.

Shaped like a dressmaker's form, the resin torso and arms serve as the base structure. "I hand-form the skirt out of hardware cloth, reinforce it with steel and lay fiberglass on it. Everything is attached with rivets." He employs two assistants who, in addition to more creative duties, help with prep work, such as smashing about 5,000 bottle caps for a junior-size dress. Dresses for outdoor spaces are made with durable materials, including industrial rubber, aluminum flashing and roofing tiles.

The cultural icons have been hugely successful. Collectors want them for their home or garden. Institutions, such as hospitals, and art centers also seek his work. He has sold more than 150.

At art shows, such as the prestigious Art Basel Miami, people frequently assume Petrey has a fashion background and ask if he can design something for them to wear. "I tell them, 'Yes, if you want to spend the money I will be happy to. You won't be able to sit down, but you will look good, and sweetheart, it's not how you feel, but how you look!'" he says, flashing a big smile.

While moving about his studio, we've ignored the white rhinoceros in the room. The life-size, powerful-looking form portends the next step in his artistic experimentation. He's leaping boldly into public art.

"I love to work big. I'm working bigger and bigger," says Petrey. "The rhino is going to be a child's giant pull toy. He will be on a platform with big, rusty steel wheels, and he will have a huge rope tied around his neck that will coil on the ground right in front of him," Petrey explains. Now naked, the sculpture will be clad in metal, probably textural copper.

Linda Lange is a freelance writer living in Knoxville.

© 2008, Knoxville News Sentinel Co.



John Petrey

"Baby Goes to Vegas" has a playful spirit, an opportunity for viewers to come up with their own storyline. John Petrey of Chattanooga uses dye to accent the red bottle-cap bodice, while miniature playing cards shape the skirt.