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Art & Specialty Tile

A look at various tile artisans, and the inspiration behind their creations

By JoAnn Locktov



"Natural Desire to Climb" series of tile by Marie Gibbons.

Marie Gibbons: Tactile Memory Tile

Jack and the Beanstalk could do worse than to depend on the "Natural Desire to Climb" series of tile by Marie Gibbons to reach his lofty treasure. Inspired by the exhibit titled Ladders, the 5" square sgaffito tiles offer a toehold into the

imaginative realm of Gibbons' memory and experience. Her interest in the organic form resulted in creating plant-type imagery as ladders. The black velvet under glaze is revealed and also scraped away. Gibbons manipulates her tiles by sketching directly onto the surface, pushing up from the bottom of the slab and pressing down from the top while the

clay is leather hard. The high relief and ornate detailing create intricate patterns, dimension and whorls of energy.

"Red Pods" and "Spiral Tree Branch" continue the exploration with organic forms. Both 12" square tiles are finished in acrylic washes and sealed with paste wax. Gibbons works directly on the tile surface, the process is immediate and spontaneous. Her post-fired finishes are a rich palette of verdant hues. They are the colors of lush forests and ripe red berries. Gibbons had an artistic epiphany 16 years ago. "I discovered clay in 1995, and when I did everything else took a step back. I had found more than just a medium, I found my MUSE." The internationally exhibited artist, who also creates figurative sculpture, has a "self directed" education. Using memory and the reflection of her own experiences, she feels the continuum in her work is that "it speaks from my life." The box tile Crow Triptych, entitled "The Journey," is a stream of consciousness with unintelligible language scrawled in the background. The crow carries an incomplete fortune; "You will enjoy many successful..." leaving the viewer to insert their relevant desire.

Gibbons took to the street to create her "Urban" tile series. Rolling slabs on city streets, she memorialized the debris of

sidewalks: manhole covers, cracks, and asphalt joints. The 5" square fired slabs were washed with black acrylic, which was then scrubbed off to reveal the white clay body. The gritty abstractions that remain are a tactile memory of every street Gibbons has traversed. Growing up on Long Island, Gibbons balances urban reality with the beaches and more natural environment of her childhood. Both co-exist and inspire work that is derived from the freedom to explore.

For more information on Marie Gibbons, visit www.mariegibbons.com.

Susan Tunick: The Color of Clay



Above Left: Blue Night: 9 1/2" w x 11 1/2" h x 4" deep.
Right: Green Halo Tile: 6" x 6" x 3/4".
 Photos by Malcolm Varon.

Ceramic artist Susan Tunick has a penchant for scale and surface. All of her creations, site-specific sculptures, mosaic murals and individual bricks and tiles are testaments to architecture. The surfaces are intricately laced, lush in color and texture. Studying architectural ornamentation has given Tunick a heightened awareness of edges, shadows and context—both physical and historical.

Tunick was inspired to work spontaneously on her recent site-specific commission, *Mt. Top Trio: Vert, Violet & Rouge*. Located on a 600-acre Vermont farm, the land is fertile with wild flowers and grasses, pear, apple and plum orchards. There are three sculptures that provide permanent landscapes of color. The sides of each organic shaped cedar sculpture are clad in ceramic tile. Each side of clay bands were created at the same time to insure that they would all shrink at the same rate and fit in their respective place. Tunick chose a completely new glazing method that allowed her to “build the colored surface from one firing to the next.” She allowed the color to evolve by glazing non-adjacent elements. By staggering the glazing, she could watch it blossom, a process Tunick compares to “the way a pointillist painting was created.”

There is a mesmerizing quality to the sculptures. The trio of forms reverberate color perhaps most vividly when seasons are harsh and nature is devoid of any strong hues. Inspired by haystacks found throughout the countryside, Tunick says, “I didn’t want the shapes to be so symmetrical. Thus, I felt that adding curves and some type of opening in the center could work well. The tile bands reiterate the circular motion of the haystacks – around and around and around!”

On a smaller scale are Tunick’s perforated tiles and brick

units. Both forms explore dimension. The perforated tiles are built with layers revealing surprising glimpses of pattern and depth. The perforations are witty reminders to both inspect and respect what lies beneath the facade.

Tunick explores the rectangular brick by forming them in wooden molds, stacking and carving them. Constructed of thick hollow backed slabs glazed in radiant colors, the pedestrian brick is elevated to iconic status. Used throughout the world for thousands of years as a humble building material, Tunick has given reverence to the shape by invigorating the surface with color and texture. The bricks vary in depth, creating shadows in their concave spaces and staggered edges. Tunick’s bricks are investigations of architectural masonry in a way that Vitruvius could have never imagined.

As President of Friends of Terra Cotta (www.preserve.org/fotc), a preservation organization devoted to protecting historic and architectural ceramics, Tunick has studied clay in architecture for over 25 years. She is invested in “seeing ceramics re-integrated into our environment...into landscape, interiors and into the facades of new buildings.” Her work represents this evolution precisely.

For more on Susan Tunick, visit www.susantunick.com.

Art of Board: From Tailslide to Tile



Detailed look at Art of Board's creations.

Scratched, dented, smashed, and abused, what to do with skateboard relics that are too damaged to carry their intrepid riders? Rich Moorhead appreciated the dense seven-ply laminated maple, the graffiti inspired graphics, and turned up tails. Where others saw broken sports equipment destined for landfill he saw an authentic surface material. Experimenting with the tools of the construction trade, he utilizes scroll and ban saws, routers, drills and sanders to create tile in four shapes, brick, cube, border and orb. He sorts the tile pieces by color, form and size. This gives a rhythm to the cacophony of pieces, the better to reconstruct walls, countertops, backsplashes, cladding and retail displays.

The art of assembling each custom installation is the meditative stage of the process. Working within the measurements of the finished project the mesh-mounted tile is laboriously placed. Moorhead starts with what he calls the “ugly” tile, usually gashed and devoid of color. They become the field, balancing dense blacks and primary colored pieces, which he adds to create flow and interest. Every deck he uses is distinct. They bear the incidents of the skater, a tumbled caballeria, a miscalculated nose slide, an attempted kick-flip.

When Moorhead was skating he explains, "We owned our decks for longer periods of time. Our riding was less harsh on the boards. Today decks wear out before the enthusiasm for skating is over. Typically the broken decks are returned to the skate shops where the trucks and wheels are removed, and the obsolete decks are thrown away." Moorhead has changed all this with his I Ride I Recycle program. Partnering with skate shops and parks across the country, the used decks are now sent to Art of Board headquarters in Hanover, Pennsylvania where they receive a second life as wood tile. Art of Board even has a "mail back program" which allows the decks to be sent to Moorhead free of charge, another incentive to participate.

Finished with sanded grout, the tile is being used in residential and commercial applications. What on first glance looks like a vibrant colored mosaic, is upon closer inspection an energetic expression of an irreverent sport that has been with us since the fifties. When Moorhead

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When Moorhead was commissioned to create tile cladding for a square column at Life Rolls On, a subsidiary of the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, he integrated "positive orbs." He searched his bins for life affirming words and images, cut them out in circles and placed them strategically amongst the carnival of scarred tiles.

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"positive orbs." He searched his bins for life affirming words and images, cut them out in circles and placed them strategically amongst the carnival of scarred tiles. He also included a Superman logo in homage to the enduring Reeve film legacy.

Skateboards are designed to be functional and illustrative, at Art of Board their purpose is sustained, without injury.

For more information about Art of Board, visit www.artofboard.com. **TILE**

About the Author: JoAnn Locktov is the author of "Tileista," a monthly column that explores the beauty of artisan tile. She is the author of two books and numerous articles on contemporary mosaics. Her public relations firm Bella Figura Communications represents creative individuals and businesses in design, architecture, art, and travel. Follow her musings on Twitter (www.twitter.com/jolocktov), and visit her at www.bellafiguracommunications.com.