



Beyond the garden gate

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HAPPY WORK IS HOW HEIDI McGEOCH and Sam Larwill describe the works of art that adorn their Bowral garden, and which they are selling to ever-increasing admirers. “Most of our work is happy work. It’s not serious,” says Heidi. “Or particularly important,” adds Sam, and both laugh. “Happy work” could also describe their new partnership, which is both a serendipitous new relationship and a meeting of compatible artistic minds.

Heidi and Sam sell their garden art under the name Heidi Garden Art. Both do metalwork, such as gates, benches, tomato stake toppers and figures from recycled tools, while Heidi also makes works in clay, from fairytale mushrooms to intricate towers that can be used as water features.

In recent years, Heidi has created pieces for friends and occasional clients, but last year she and Sam started the business and quickly found themselves flush with orders. It started with a popular stall at last Easter’s Burrawang Market. Then they had loads of sales when they opened their garden as part of the Southern Highlands Art Studio Trail last October. “We would have had 600 people through,” says Sam. “It was amazing.” They are now regulars at the Bowral Farmers Market at Moss Vale Showground.

In October they were commissioned by Bowral Hospital to make a large commemorative plaque for the children’s ward. It’s in the naive style of Heidi’s distinctive gates, with a girl, a boy, birds and a rainbow. “I think they liked the naivety as children will be the ones looking at it,” says Heidi. “It will be in a lovely spot over a window with the sun streaming in.”

Sam and Heidi worked together in their early 20s, long before they were a couple, when they lived in Bungendore in the

1980s. Sam, his wife, Heidi and another friend started making metal candelabras, furniture and sculpture. “We did Paddington Markets and got quite successful, and started making pieces for places like Art of Stone. Then we thought, God, what are we doing?” says Sam. “We had to work too hard.”

“We were doing it for fun and had a business before we knew it,” explains Heidi. “We wanted to make one-offs, and suddenly people were saying, ‘We need three tables.’ We just kind of...”

“Panicked,” sums up Sam.

Then their lives separated. Heidi went to Wagga, married and had three children. Sam had two boys, moved to Victoria and worked as a plumber.

In 2004, Heidi moved to the Highlands, having separated from her husband. Two years ago, her friend from Bungendore called to mention that Sam was also separated and to orchestrate a meeting. The two resumed contact, fell in love, and now live together, doing metalwork once more.

Heidi has never stopped creating art in multiple disciplines. After school, she did dress design because she wanted to do theatre costumes. “Then I went to Bungendore and started metalworking. I couldn’t weld so I would draw the designs. But I must have got the hang of it because when I went to Wagga, the farmer I married couldn’t weld so I taught him.”

She recently finished a Diploma of Fine Arts at TAFE, doing digital imaging, works on paper, photography, painting and ceramics. In November one of her paintings was selected by the chair of the TAFE Commission Board, NSW, to be printed on the organisation’s Christmas card.

“My work (in various mediums) is about shape and colour,” says Heidi. “When I paint or draw, there’s a lot of colour, wild colour, and just the shape of things. A simple, naive sort of shape. And Sam’s is much the same too.”

“Using recycled stuff, you don’t have too much choice really,” jokes Sam.

The pair regularly ransack Wingecarribee Council’s Reviva Centre for old tools and metal furniture that they can rework. Sam creates figures from scrap, imaginatively using bolts, washers, lawn mower blades and shovel heads. “I love to find something like two classic old steel jack hammers for \$15, pull them apart and put all the bits on a table, and just see what might work.”

Sam also makes braziers which have become great sellers. He decorates old hot water tanks by cutting small holes with a plasma cutter to make playful figures. “The beauty of them is they look twice as good at night when they’re lit and the glow comes through the pictures,” says Heidi.

Heidi’s gates and wall plaques are also made with a plasma cutter, which cuts without pressure being applied. She draws pictures on the metal and cuts freehand, a very difficult skill to master, says Sam admiringly. “I work in near darkness because I’ve got a helmet on,” says Heidi.

“Ninety per cent of metalwork you see now is computer generated, where you bang it into the computer and a machine does it. There’s so much more effort, passion and love in creating hand made art. It just has more soul. And it’s more personal if we’re making something on commission.

“We’re doing a gate now for a person with an olive farm, so we’ll do olive trees, and she’s got kids who play soccer so we’ll work that in. For someone else, I put in mermaids because they wanted it for their beach house.”

Heidi’s own front gate has two floating figures for her and Sam, three stars together for her children, and things she loves like a girl and boy, the moon, a tree of life, an owl and chooks. Some elements are worked in to provide balance. “The apple had to fill the gap to hold a star,” Heidi explains. “It’s got to join and it has to have enough space to look balanced.”

The couple work in a studio in their very long backyard. It has two parts, a workroom where Heidi can do works on paper, and a room containing “our lovable mess”, where they do their metalwork.


Heidi’s workroom has to be closed off, as their work creates an incredible amount of metal dust. The plasma cutter leaves slag which must be ground back, a messy job which Sam tackles after Heidi has cut the design.

A separate shed serves as their shop and contains many examples of their work, such as plaques, hooks, brackets, light fittings, toilet roll holders, and birds which can be tacked on to trees or fences. “We put them on the back fence because I thought it might keep the birds away from the vegies, but it just encouraged them,” says Sam.

Much of their work is already on view in the garden itself. It’s there at every turn – from Heidi’s ceramic totems and towers to clever tomato stake toppers, their own invention, which hold three stakes together at a point with a metal decoration on top.

Heidi says garden art was an obvious extension of her clay and metal work. “I’ve always had this passion to make garden art because I’ve always lived in small houses and you can’t put much inside a small house. It has to be out in the garden.

“I’m prolific, so I can’t have anything more in the house. And I am a gardener, so it really made sense to adorn the garden. And now Sam’s come along with the same interest – and we’re just so grateful to be able to make living from what we do.”

Happy days. 

Heidi Garden Art is available at Bowral Farmers Market at Moss Vale Showground or see www.heidigardenart.com.au

