

Little Addictions:

Juggler, Fairie & Swing

by Elizabeth Howard



Swing

Juggler

Fairie



I have been making things with my hands for as long as I can remember. My happiest childhood memories were in my “studio,” a little nook under my parents’ basement stairs. I entertained myself for hours, lost in the joy of creating. Growing up in a supportive yet traditional family with no creative mentor, I didn’t contemplate a career in the arts because I didn’t consider myself an artist. I was a crafter long before the term developed the respect it has today. However, in 1993, I took a bookbinding class and a world of possibility opened up for me. I fell in love with the materials and meditative nature of sewing and binding. I applied and was accepted to the University of Alabama’s Book Arts program where I received an MFA in bookbinding and letterpress printing. When people asked me about entering the program, I told them that I wasn’t sure where it was going to lead but believed it was a stepping stone on a credible creative path.

After graduation, I was fortunate to find a position as a specialty bookbinder at a large bindery in Phoenix, Arizona. I loved working with my hands every day and creating objects of beauty for people. It was a wonderful experience, but after several years I began to yearn to work independently and question whether bookbinding truly fulfilled me. When I became a mother, I decided to take time off from my career. Focusing all of my energy on my two boys, I couldn’t seem to make time for my craft. I instinctively knew that when the time was right, I would start to work again, but I wasn’t sure it would be as a bookbinder. A variety of ideas began to percolate inside me but nothing rose to the surface.

Then, unexpectedly last fall, I had a burst of creative energy. I woke up one morning thinking about the blossom fairies I’d seen in Salley Mavor’s book *Felt Wee Folk*. The dolls touched my heart, appealing to the little girl inside of me. Using her fairies as inspiration, I designed my first doll, Juggler. She expresses a quiet state of mind, mysterious, and magical in her dreamlike world. Despite the simplicity of the color palette, a visual richness imbues the figure. →

Tools and Materials

- Acrylic paints
- Adhesives: hot glue, (Aleene's — tacky glue)
- Box: papier mâché
- Chenille stems
- Cotton batting
- Crackle medium
- Embellishments: beads, decorative paper, textiles, glitter, millinery leaves, pom-pom balls, ribbon,
- vintage findings, wire, wood
- Embroidery floss
- Flowers: faux
- Needle
- Paintbrushes
- Scissors
- Spray paint
- Styrofoam ball
- Wooden beads: unvarnished
- Wooden discs

Technique

I begin each figure by fabricating an armature out of chenille stems and wrapping them with embroidery floss, keeping the thread as flat as possible to create a smooth line. After the body is assembled, I deconstruct several faux flowers, rearrange them to create a skirt, then layer tulle or other material to add dimension and interest. The skirt is attached to the body with hot glue. I create a tunic using scraps of antique textiles and trim. When I am satisfied with the outfit, I secure it to the armature and stuff with cotton batting. A faceless wooden head gives the piece an ephemeral quality and I spend time antiquing each one, brushing a thin wash of acrylic paint over the surface to bring out the cracks. The head is glued to the top of the armature, then hair, miniature flowers, beads, or sequins are added. Playing with different poses, I scrutinize each one. A slight bend of the arm here or tilt of the head there can make an enormous difference in the expression of the work. I've also experimented with a variety of bases. Juggler stands on a simple wooden disc that I antiqued and glittered. Fairie perches on a Styrofoam ball that I cut in half, spray painted and surrounded with vintage trim. The design of Swing was expanded to create an environment the figure could inhabit. A papier mâché box serves as a base on which a wooden swing is attached to a wire horseshoe covered with ribbon vine and decorated with trim, velvet paper, and a vintage button. My dolls are composed of elements I adore: vintage materials, flowers, fabric, color and texture. Delicate details are revealed if one takes the time to allow the eye to linger and examine them.

Tips

- Work on your craft every day even if it's only for a short time. Make your artwork a priority and establish a regular work habit. Inspiration can hit at the most unexpected times. Be ready for it.
- Look up artists you admire or search for new ones on the Web using Google's image search or Etsy. If you discover an artist whose work speaks to you, note what is appealing and think about transforming aspects to make it your own.
- If you feel blocked creatively, it may be the fear of not executing something well or being unhappy with the result. Create and explore without worrying what your work will look like when you're finished.
- Imagine what your doll would look like if you saw it in a boutique or gallery and fell in love with it. What qualities draw you to a particular doll? Allow your personal aesthetic to guide you. ❖

Elizabeth Howard is the proprietor of little addictions, a studio in Phoenix, Arizona. Elizabeth can't stop making her girls and she hopes that they become habit-forming to those who collect them. You can view more of Elizabeth's work on her Web site at littleaddictions.net. She may also be reached by e-mail at hello@littleaddictions.net.

