

Arts & Entertainment

Sculptor brings 'whimsical characters' to life

Clay creations quickly grow into thriving endeavour

By STEPHANIE THIESSEN
The Champion

When local artist Marlene Kawalez sculpted her first character, she could hardly believe someone wanted it. This was no flawlessly-featured porcelain doll she had brought to life, to say the least.

"She was a homely, older-looking ballerina with the grace of a farmer and big, ugly feet," Ms Kawalez said.

But she was comical and possessed an inner joy that brought her to life in a way perfection couldn't. In many ways, Ms Kawalez said, the sculpture was a self-portrait.

Soon she birthed another character. And another. That was just a couple of years ago. Today, the artist sells her polymer clay "whimsical characters," as she calls them, across Canada and the United States and even has devoted collectors.

Each character is a tangible figment of her imagination, painstakingly detailed with hand-sewn clothes and life-like hair.

A character can take up to 40 hours to complete and can be as small as six inches tall.

"I love faces. One of my passions is capturing an expression, a feeling," Ms Kawalez said, adding, "I'm overly sensitive, so I tend to study people."

On her Web site, her sculptures are divided into the following categories: divas and fancy ladies, fairies and butterflies, fun and fantasy, and swinging seniors.

One of the "swinging seniors" is Cinderella Senior, a delicate, grey-haired woman wearing a powder blue party dress and holding up a glass slipper. Beside her is this description: "It has been 50 years since Cinderella and Prince Charming have been wed. After 10 children and 25 grandchildren, her dress is too snug and the slipper no longer fits."

Once again, Cinderella Senior's joy seems to radiate from within despite the toll life has taken on her outer self.

Although one might be tempted to call

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the characters dolls, Ms Kawalez cringes at the term, which seems to strip them of their creativity and artistry. She has a difficult enough time gaining recognition in art circles, with shows seldom having a category for her to enter.

"It's not acknowledged as an art form," Ms Kawalez said of polymer clay sculptures.

That frustration recently caused the local artist to branch out. She's now splitting her time between polymer clay and "regular" clay — creating earthenware and stoneware people.

"I wanted the recognition as an artist," said Ms Kawalez, a member of the Fine Arts Society of Milton.

That move paid off recently when Ms Kawalez was told, much to her surprise, that a piece she'd submitted to a juried art show at the Mississauga Art Gallery had received an honourable mention. It was chosen in mid-December from among 500 submissions to be displayed for several months — until February 4 — at the gallery.

Regardless of the material she uses, Ms Kawalez said the whims that's come to define her pieces remains.

The clay sculpture that garnered the judges' attention at the art show is a smiling woman.

"She's not even an attractive woman," Ms Kawalez said, explaining she found a photo of her subject in a magazine. "She just looked so happy. She was smiling so much you could see her tongue, upper and lower teeth."

This isn't the norm, the artist said.

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Photos by GRAHAM PAINE

Sculptor Marlene Kawalez shows off some of her work.



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