

A needle and some wool

Katrina Isbill-Floyd—known to her fans as Bella McBride—creates whimsical figures

BY SANDRA PHINNEY



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■ Katrina Isbill-Floyd is the mastermind behind McBride House One-of-a-Kind Needle Felted Sculptures.

Eight years ago, after taking a needle felting workshop, Katrina Isbill-Floyd's mother-in-law gave her a tiny plastic bag filled with soft pink wool, thinking that Katrina would have fun felting. A single barbed needle was in the bottom of the bag. Little did Katrina know how this simple gift would alter her life.

Later, and with a slight sense of trepidation, she unzipped the bag and rolled the soft texture between her fingers. The only instruction she had received was: "You poke it." So, rolling a bit of wool between her fingers, she poked it. She poked again and again. Crunch, crunch, crunch... the needle slid in and out, making a peculiar sound. Soon it formed a tiny ball. Then a shape appeared. It was a wee pig!

Katrina wondered, *How is this possible? How can a handful of fibre, that barely weighs a thing, not only turn into a little pink pig, but can also shape my world into something filled with such joy?*

Creative creatures

Katrina Isbill-Floyd was diagnosed with fibromyalgia some 20 years ago,

not long out of high school. Although she didn't let it define who she was, it always framed her world and working full time was difficult. She yearned to have her own business.

"I've always been creative—especially in ways to make extra income. For example, the summer I finished university and got married, in 1994," Katrina explains, "I made and sold enough pickles to make a down payment on our home." She often wondered what she could make and sell online. As soon as the little pink pig was complete, she posted it on Etsy. It sold within a few days. "I was hooked!"

Now, the 45-year-old is the mastermind behind McBride House One-of-a-kind Needle Felted Sculptures, and works from home where she lives with her forester husband, Jamie Floyd, in Kiersteadville, NB. She adopted the name "Bella McBride" as it's easier

for clients to remember. "Although I love my name, when I got married it became even longer (Katrina Isbill-Floyd) and having to spell it over and over again, I always swore that if I had my own business, I'd take on a pen

name that was easy to remember—and easy to spell." She

adds, "McBride is my great grandmother's maiden name, and there was a great, great-aunt referred to as "Old Bell McBride", so I added the "a" on Bell and became Bella McBride."

Since making that first little pig, Katrina has made scores and scores of creatures.

They range from small owls, mice and more pigs to life-sized mounted heads depicting everything from a poodle to a fox, bear and sheep. A recent creation is a deer with doleful eyes. (Katrina moulds large eyes from polymer clay, bakes them, then applies some varathane.) Originally, her intent was to create a life-size fawn. After days



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■ Katrina, aka Bella McBride, creates charming human characters, woodland creatures, and flat soft sculptures that can hang on a wall. She also makes stand-alone pieces like mythical creatures and custom orders.



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and days of work, the enormity of this undertaking hit home: she'd never be able to charge enough to offset the time invested. Solution? Cut off the head, add some antlers, and mount it!

Along with her woodland creatures, charming human characters, and flat soft sculptures which can be hung on a wall, the artisan also makes stand-alone pieces like mythical Norse Vikings and Valkyries. And she loves doing special orders. She says, "I love the challenge of creating something new, but then I love the challenge of improving what I've made before, too."

Work as heart share

Johanna Bertin of Harvey Station, NB, says, "I fell in love with Bella's creations immediately when I saw them on the internet. So, I commissioned a work by her: my dog Da Jin and I walking. Da Jin had died the summer before and I missed her dreadfully." When Johanna went to pick up the piece, she was so charmed by Bella's other works that she returned home not only with the commissioned piece, but also with a dancing mouse and a large mounted head of a wolf. "Bella combines fantasy, whimsy, and immense talent in a truly humble persona," she says, "and manages to create unique pieces of lasting charm."

This past summer, Johanna took a



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one-day felting workshop with Bella at edVentures Fredericton. Of the workshop experience, she says, "I am not destined to be a felter, but it was a fun-filled class and I came home with a lovely Canadian beaver."

One time, Katrina received an order for a larger-than-life mounted head of a skunk. It was destined for a woman with serious health issues as a gift from a group of friends. Although giving a large felted skunk to someone may seem a bit odd, it turns out that the person with health issues had gone on a healing retreat where she discovered that her spirit animal was a skunk. Now she always takes it with her when she goes for treatments. "So while it's amusing to think of someone having a skunk for a spirit animal," Katrina

says, "it's also touching to think that something I made could bring someone such comfort."

Aside from selling from her online shop, Katrina takes part in four major artisan exhibits a year. She vividly remembers her first show four years ago at the Nova Scotia Fibre Arts Festival in Amherst where she met a vendor whose husband had died of cancer. "He always told her that he was going to come back as a crow. So she custom-ordered one from me. Since then, she's acquired several more crow pieces of mine and has become a treasured friend. It thrills me to be part of their love story."

When asked about challenges related to her work, the artist says there's only one tough part: dealing with the



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Felting as a hobby

Marilyn Francis loves to felt. She also loves to share her knowledge with others. Because of her L'nu (Mi'kmaq) heritage, she's drawn to creating patterns that depict nature—everything from butterflies to bears and eagles. She's also fond of creating symbols that reflect L'nu teachings relating to mother earth, water, and sky.

Although the Acadia First Nation member from Yarmouth is quick to say, "I don't know much about it. I just love it," she's made everything from wall hangings to change purses and glasses cases. She's also felted bags to carry pipes and smudge bowls.

Marilyn encourages everyone to take a class or workshop, adding, "Anybody can do it! Just be sure to use one hundred percent wool."

The self-taught artist also felts soap which doesn't require anything save for soap and fibre. It makes a lovely gift, and is as easy as 1-2-3

Marilyn says, "Go ahead. Try this!"

To make felted soaps

Wind strands of wool fibre around a bar of soap. Make sure you can't see any soap through the wool. Next, take a strand of a different colour and make circles around the soap in a couple different places. Repeat with another colour or two.

- Take a "knee high" nylon and place the soap in the toe. Tie a knot as close to the soap as you can. Put the soap in a basin (or large bowl) of warm water and rub the soap with your hands and fingers as if you are "kneeding" it.
- As the fibre melds together, it will compact and start to feel firm. At this point, remove the soap and let it dry.
- Felted soaps make a great lather when you want to scrub in the tub, and they last a long time.

Marilyn Francis (centre photo, left, with daughter Marilynn-Leigh Francis) loves felting.

brain fog associated with fibromyalgia. Although this condition can be debilitating, Katrina says, "It's often a matter of picking up my needle and pushing through. As long as I have a plan and a list I'm able to push through it. It's worth it to be able to do what I love to do every day."

The biggest thrill, aside from creating her menagerie, is selling her work. Sometimes they are barely posted online before they're sold—Katrina thinks the record may be less than a moment after posting one particular sculpture. She says, "But I have to remember that every piece belongs to a certain someone. Sometimes the rightful owner is found right away; other times, it can take several months, if not a year, to find its owner."

When her beloved creatures don't sell, it can be heartbreaking. "It's hard not to second-guess yourself when this happens, and to have the faith that what you make is worthy, and that the right someone will come along. Once someone does fall in love with it, I always think, "Ahhh....that's why it hasn't sold before. It belongs to you." 🐾

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