

Artist Deborah Snow

No Boundaries



By Jim Brumm

Northern California artist Deborah Snow gazes out at the rolling hills and oak trees that surround her home and studio in Sebastopol, California. With blond hair piled up on her head, denim shirt spattered with paint, blue eyes sparkling and a faint smile on her lips, Deborah is the picture of contentment. As a cat winds around her ankles, Deborah turns back to her task at hand: wadding up brown paper grocery bags and soaking them in a bowl filled with black coffee, pushing the paper under with a wooden spoon to keep it wet. This is an experiment. She's trying to stain the paper a darker shade and is hoping the coffee will do the trick.. Why is she trying to stain grocery bags? It's part of a unique art form she has developed.

But let's back up.

Deborah wasn't always the free-form artist plying her craft in the hills of Sonoma County. It was a long and adventurous path of self-discovery that led her here.

Deborah was raised in Los Angeles County. Her parents built a home in the San Bernadino Mountains. Her father was in the rock and concrete business, her mother was a secretary.

When Deborah was fifteen, her father, sick of the crazy bustle of L.A., moved his family to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where her parents opened a gift shop. Deborah went to high school there, and was voted Homecoming Queen.

Even at that age, she was drawn to art, working as a silk screener as part of a program in job training, and taking a job in a shop where silk-screened T-shirts were sold.

Like many of us, life took over and sidelined Deborah from her true calling, and carried her along a path she hadn't planned. After high

school she worked as a waitress and attended business college in Colorado, ending up working for the airline industry in Customer Service and Group Travel and Tickets. She became certified in travel, tourism and marketing, learning customs laws, visa regulations and international rules of aviation. During this time, she married. Though working in a corporate position, she and her new husband lived part of the summers in a teepee in the Colorado mountains.

Deborah worked in the airline/travel industry for twenty years. Eventually she was transferred to San Francisco and lived in Pacific Heights.

This is when the long-hidden, free-spirited, artist Deborah collided with the buttoned-down, corporate Deborah.

"One day I was standing there in the city in my suit and heels," said Deborah, "and it hit me. What am I doing? I wish I were back in my teepee!"

Deborah, burned out, quit the airlines and went to work for a bakery and started hanging out on the coast. She attended massage school and started doing massage for a living.

During this time Deborah made a trip to Jamaica that changed her life and influenced her art and outlook. There, she met and was embraced as a sister by a group of Jamaican women.

"They said I was the first white woman they met who had no boundaries, no judgments; they loved me and I loved them," said Deborah. "Jamaica changed my life because the depth of my connection to the creator and the importance I give that in my life was *truly* praised and acknowledged by them." Poking the wooden spoon at the wadded paper in the coffee, Deborah smiled wistfully at the memory. "They're



Ceramics bearing Deborah Snow's unique designs

poor, but they're the richest people I know. I cry like a baby every time I have to leave. I came to know myself there. Life there is rich and simple, while our culture can be so shallow."

Since then Deborah has visited Jamaica often. Along with a friend, she helped build a home on the land of her new "family" and regularly sends supplies.

With this expanded outlook on life, she moved north to Sonoma County, attended Santa Rosa Junior College and earned a degree in graphic design and computer graphics.

"That's where I learned I have an eye for color and design," she said.

She went to work for a graphic design company creating gift bags using other people's art.

One day she learned how much the companies were paying for designs and decided she could do it too.



Deborah Snow at work in her Sebastopol, California, studio

"I went home and started painting. I made six designs that went to print for Cost Plus World Market and Dollar Stores. I realized I didn't want to be sitting at a computer. I wanted to do surface design. Everything you see that has a pattern or design on it—bags,

carpets, plates, cups, wall paper, shower curtains—*somebody* designed it. I had an innate skill for that."

While attending college Deborah had seen a film about the Mbuti, a tribe in Africa who pull bark from trees, fold it and paint designs on it. The class was given paper, crumpled, wetted and dried, to represent bark and given an assignment: To do something with organic colors as it was done in Africa.

Deborah's work received an A, and her instructor wanted to keep and frame it.

"It wasn't intended as a viable art," said Deborah, "just as an exercise."

Deborah started saving brown paper grocery bags, wadding them up, wetting them, then drying them and designing patterns on them.

"Everyone thought I was crazy," she said.

"But I was encouraged because everyone I showed it to loved it. I scanned a piece to see if it would reproduce with the shadows and raw look of the original. It did." She laughed, brushing away a strand of hair from her face with the back of her hand, and said. "Actually, some people told me that it wouldn't work, that it was *too* raw." She shook the wooden spoon at me for emphasis. "I said, if it's too raw for you, then I'm on the right track!"

As it turns out, it was exactly the right track. Deborah created over one hundred pieces and went to the Surtex Art Show in New York City. She shared a booth there with her college instructor who had been so encouraging.

"I displayed my art in raw form," said Deborah. "No frames, just raw-edged, ripped pieces stuck up with double-stick tape."

Too raw? Apparently not. Deborah left that show having sold thirty-five pieces to companies wanting to use her designs as patterns for area rugs.

"It was far from mainstream and people liked it," she said.

Since then interest in Deborah's work has widened considerably. She has a line of houseware ceramics being produced through Fred Myers, and Ross is doing a line of her

African prints. Carpets from her line are due to be produced from Home Comforts and Home Fires and distributed to J.C. Penney's, Neiman Marcus, Macy's, Bloomingdale's and at interior design shows.



Deborah's work has ethnic and tribal overtones, but to some, it is very sophisticated. Her raw, unfettered designs and rich color schemes evoke an earthiness and connection to the whole. The eye follows the path she creates, sometimes through geometric shapes and angled patterns, sometimes along curving, meandering lines replete with muted hues and unexpected turns. It's just beautiful.

Besides offering her work as surface design, it is available as framed art as well.

Deborah creates her work in an old barn, steps from the home she shares with her daughter, Dasha (her son, Boone, recently moved away to start his own adventure). One side of the barn opens up to embrace the view of the hills and the soft Sonoma County light. It's quiet and peaceful. It suits her.

"I hope," she said, leaning on her easel, "to have enough success to stay creatively open; to be flexible and able to continue to create my art.

As she strolls back across the expanse of grass that leads from her studio, cat following, I can see what her Jamaican friends saw: A woman connected with her world. No judgments. No boundaries.

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