



Paul Church / The Courier-Tribune

VISUAL MEMORY — Carol Gentithes of Johnston and Gentithes Art Pottery poses with 'Madagascar' which was exhibited in the 2009 Smithsonian Craft Show. The iguana was inspired by a family trip to Madagascar to celebrate her mother's 80th birthday in 1983 and is decorated with all the birds, fish and scenery she saw. She said Madagascar the iguana is a visual memory of that time and place.

Her surreal art Smithsonian-worthy

By Mary Anderson
Staff Writer

SEAGROVE — Carol Gentithes, Seagrove artist and potter, was one of 120 artists selected to exhibit at 27th annual Smithsonian Craft Show in April.

Gentithes' was in the mixed media category, but her work defies definition. Her animals with clay heads and porcelain bodies are unique, whimsical and fun to

contemplate. They are reminiscent of parodies, fairy tales, fables, jigsaw puzzles, caricatures and hidden pictures. Every one makes you ask her to tell you its story.

"Some patterns do tell a story," Gentithes said, "and others are collages. All the creatures are different, because I go with the theme and use so many different images. There are no sketches."

Gentithes looks at a butterfly,

for example, and sees alternate images, so parts of the butterfly become parts of other figures.

The Smithsonian program for the show described her work as "sculptures handbuilt in porcelain with an intense focus on the surface decoration. Built up with stains, glazes, silkscreen emulsions, wax crayons, and glass, her (Gentithes') surfaces are a feast

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for the eyes that reveal a micro world of imaginary characters and parodies of contemporary figures. Her work is a surreal portrait of the animal kingdom."

Look at "Mr. Rabbit Goes to Washington" and Lewis Carroll pops into your mind. Mr. Rabbit is rushing off with a brief case. His porcelain body is a blend of Washington, D.C. monuments and characters.

"He's going to defend the 'Pig With Lipstick,'" Gentithes jokes and points to the next counter where there is a most feminine pig wearing lipstick. Gentithes' sense of humor and imagination lead her from sweet scenes to utter nonsense in her creations.

"I have always had an interest in animals. There is such a variety and throughout folklore, have been given human traits," Gentithes said.

Gentithes and her husband, Fred Johnston, came to Seagrove 12 years ago, based on the town's reputation as a

pottery village.

They had met at Alfred University in New York and were looking for an artist-friendly place to live. She grew up in Ohio and he in Virginia.

"Fred told me he knew a place where you could set up shop and people would come to see you," she said. After a few visits, they loved the atmosphere, bought a house 249 East Main Street and opened Johnston and Gentithes Art Pottery. They worked for, with and learned from the other potters along the way.

"This is a good community. We have made friends we can talk shop with and have the most wonderful potlucks in the most beautiful pottery," Gentithes said. "The whole state of North Carolina has an appreciation for crafts and pottery that you don't see in other places. It is a state that nurtures crafts."

Gentithes said she was pleased to see North Carolina so well represented at the Smithsonian Show. Out of up to 1,900 applications from all over the U.S., only 120 are invited to participate. Different professionals judge the entries every year and look for work

that exemplifies innovation, creativity and technical merit. The Smithsonian Craft Show features superb craft artists who reflect the story of contemporary American craft in one of 12 categories: basketry, ceramics, decorative fiber, furniture, glass, jewelry, leather, metal, mixed media, paper, wearable art and wood. The Smithsonian bills it as "the nation's most prestigious craft show" where "no artist is ever included without being juried into the show" and "only outstanding technical excellence and execution earn entrance."

Going to Washington was like going home to Gentithes. That's where she lived and worked in the travel industry for 10 years after graduating from Duke University with a degree in English literature. She had taken a few clay classes at Duke, but not toward a serious career.

In 1987, after Gentithes' father passed away, her mother, Lula, moved to Washington and was working in the U.S. House of Representatives. She asked Gentithes to make a caricature of Tip O'Neill for a retirement present for the long-time

Speaker of the House. Her mom recalled a caricature Gentithes had made of Groucho Marx at Duke.

That's when Gentithes realized she wanted to be and could be a clay artist, so she started taking classes, applied to Alfred University and met Fred Johnston.

Gentithes said her art education began in childhood when her mother took her and two older brothers and a sister to her homeland, Greece, every year and took them through many museums.

"We were bored a the time, but I absorbed a lot of art history and developed an appreciation for it," Gentithes said. "We kids would spend summers in Greece where art is everywhere."

Gentithes said she was thrilled to be selected for the Smithsonian Show and have thousands of people come to see her work in the historic National Museum Building.

Only one other potter from Seagrove has ever been selected for the Smithsonian show, and that was her husband, Fred Johnston, who has been invited twice — in 1998 and 2005.

Gentithes donated a piece for the silent auction, but it was online, so she doesn't know how much it brought. Proceeds from the show go to the Smithsonian museums and research centers to support cutting-edge science, preserve and display national treasures and educate children and adults about the museums.

At the show, Gentithes noticed that the best selling items were functional, that people were justifying their purchases as useful items — a sign of the economic times even among the monied shoppers.

The one collaboration of the Johnston and Gentithes team is functional pottery — she adds her distinctive fantasy creatures to his wood-fired bowls and cups, then refires the pieces to integrate the designs into the clay.

"I like the shades, textures and shapes of pottery," she said.

Gentithes has exhibited her work in numerous museums and is in various collections throughout the country.

■ **Contact:** 626-6116 or manderson@courier-tribune.com