

# TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

## ***Kristy Higby***

*The following text is a questionnaire filled out by the artist on behalf of the curator.*

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### **In general, why do you do what you do?**

I sat down in a quiet place to answer these questions and am stumped by the very first one asking ‘why?’ Making art is such a natural necessity for me that I never question it. It’s just who I am and what I do. Gilda Radner said it best, “I can always be distracted by love, but eventually I get horny for creativity.”

### **What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?**

The commitment comes from a need to celebrate the individual voice and share/explore a truth.

### **What influences your work?**

Poetry, craftsmanship, and people being true to their convictions.

My current work with artists’ books explores the connections between poem and reader, art and viewer, poem and sculptural form.

Poems that involve me the most are ones that reveal themselves to the reader in a measured way. That is also what attracts me to book arts as an art form. Like a well-told story it can make the viewer curious about what’s next as well as engage them through touch. When a particular poem on a page in a printed book makes you stop, draw in a breath, and not want to turn the next page it deserves to stand alone. The artist book allows for that and adds a physical and tactile dimension to the poem’s voice.

### **Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how?**



*Kristy Higby- Jack In The Box  
Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007*

An important personal aspect is a comfortable connection for me between my interest in art and technology (specifically digital arts) and my aesthetic preference to work with certain physical materials and processes.

**Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?**

Not as a conscious rule, but it does happen. Some poems that I choose to work with resonate with a past experience and the wooden book covers and closures are inspired by the medieval book form and the fine craftsmanship reflected there.

**How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?**

Utility is not so important but function is. I want my books to fit comfortably in someone's hand and invite exploration with reward.

**Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?**

I have a large studio that accommodates book arts, painting, drawing, digital arts, and all of the supplies accumulated from dozens of workshops taken over the years. I work alone and occasionally collaborate with my husband who is a painter.

**What does "mastery" mean to you?**

Understanding the efficient use of tools and materials so that time is better spent on concept and content.

**Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there?**

We moved to our residence in Alexander, North Carolina, three years ago.

**How long have you lived in the south?**

22 years total.

**If you moved to your current home from outside the south, what brought you to the south?**

A youthful indiscretion but one that I'm very grateful for. ☺

**Is your work influenced by the south in any way?**

I would say that it's influenced by the many generous southern artists that I worked with and learned from both at the University of South Carolina and the Penland School of Crafts.

**Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place (rural/urban, international, concrete/ imaginary, natural, micro/macro environments, etc.)**

My work in both artists' books and documentaries is driven first by people and the human interest/personal relationship story that is often the story behind the story ...place is secondary.

**Do you see yourself as an innovator?**

Every artist who is true to his or her own creative voice is an innovator by definition; hopefully opening up a new line of unique artwork.

"It does not matter how badly you paint, as long as you don't paint badly like other people". George Moore

**How is your work evolving?**

I have a 30-year career as a visual artist working in low- and high-tech mediums such as artists' books digital arts. My artists' books tell stories in measured and sequential ways; using 'a creative treatment of actuality.' So do my documentaries.

My students' insatiable interest in learning the newest technologies led me to a summer workshop in digital video. It became an added direction for my work two years ago.

My first short documentary, *Flag Day*, was very rewarding to do. It came at a time when artists were searching for a way to respond to 9/11 and major policy reactions such as the Iraq War. It was also well received and that gave me the confidence to make another.

Because I teach for a living I have the luxury of working on my own work without deadlines. My second short documentary, *Bowl Digger*, took the better part of a year to film and edit. For the structure, I relied on my visual arts background and told the story in still frames first. The amount and placement of video footage was largely controlled by what worked with the stills.

I'm currently working on a documentary that is a chronicle of one man's journey through the 20th century and beyond; Cornie brings lessons from the past to the future. His is a story of how to struggle through adversity and witness inhumanity yet emerge with dignity, grace and good humor.

The nearly century-long reminiscences of Robert L. Watson, affectionately known as 'Cornie,' paint a vivid picture of the life of an African-American in the 20th century and beyond. Born at the dawn of the First World War, he was a veteran of the Second, where despite his service to his country he was nevertheless disparaged as a second-class citizen. Sadly, this was nothing new: in his youth in historic Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, he endured segregation and institutional prejudice that severely limited his options. Yet in the face of these imbalances he discovered that not every privileged white wished to

shut him out, and he gained a quiet dignity that gave even unabashed racists pause.

Private school student Lyndsey Dawkins, born and raised safely beyond the implementation of civil rights, emotionally relives Cornie's story that she heard him tell, and now associates a face to the benefits she enjoys but he never had. A torch is passed, and like Lyndsey, you too will remember and thank Cornie.

**Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?**

For me, this community is a collection of artists and other creative people I've known over my lifetime. To be a member of this community you only have to ask one question... "So, what are you working on?" The Internet has made it easy to keep in touch and share work.

Our walls reflect a timeline of this growing community. In each phase of our 30-year marriage (undergraduate school, grad school, first teaching job, etc) we traded artwork and by now enjoy an art collection that is as precious to us as any family photo album.

**Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture?**

No, just someone who tried to understand it.

**How did you learn your craft?**

I am a workshop junkie. I love the camaraderie, sharing, learning, infusion, and concentrated activity.

**Do you share your knowledge/technique/experience with others--the next generation of artists/craftspeople?**

Early in my career someone said to 'teach some kid the thing you do best.'

Next year will be my 30<sup>th</sup> year teaching studio art at all levels. 'To teach is to learn twice.' Creative energy is a constant loop. I suppose it's the ultimate workshop. ☺

**What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the south? And, alternative places like Penland, Arrowmont, John C Campbell Folk School?**

Critical. One of my favorite current political bumper stickers is, 'Evolve, damn it.' Schools that offer programs in contemporary craft offer a way to evolve and pay it forward. That way we will... 'truly have a wealth of powerful artists pushing the envelope, protecting and evolving traditions, ensuring that the vitality of the field continues...'