

# The Magical World



A collection of Katie Gardenia's whimsical dolls watches over the artist's studio in Matlacha.

# of Katie Gardenia

*Fairies, mermaids, and other fantasy creatures serve as inspiration for the artist's dolls*



Harry

by Pamela Gilbert Wortzel  
photos by Brian Stromlund

Entering the Matlacha studio of Katie Gardenia is like wandering into a fairy-tale world inhabited by a gifted sorceress, who uses her mysterious powers to create extraordinary creatures of myth and magic. It may sound like a lot of hocus-pocus, but Gardenia is a gifted artist who really does bring the world of dreams and fantasies to life with her unique doll sculptures. Seated in her Pine Island workroom surrounded by piles of colorful fabric, handmade felt, yarn, embroidery thread, paints, beads, buttons, shells, feathers, dragonfly wings, and dried branches and leaves, Gardenia deftly conjures her imaginary creatures into being.

*Like the creatures of ancient myths and fairy tales, many of Gardenia's doll sculptures seem to be captured in the midst of transformation.*



Crabby

The world of Katie Gardenia is a world of metamorphosis. Like the creatures of ancient myths and fairy tales, many of Gardenia's doll sculptures seem to be captured in the midst of transformation. They exist at the magical junction where the human figure merges with the natural world.

Mermaids, fairies, and other exotic creatures abound. A butterfly woman wears a pinecone vest and cuffs made from coconut-tree pods, and another whimsical winged creature is part bumblebee. A joyous pink flamingo lady with a papier-mâché flamingo mask is adorned with lovely roseate spoonbill feathers, and another delightfully eccentric character is half human, half crab. Each of her dolls has its own story that evolves out of the process of creation.

Many of Gardenia's figures seem to gaze out at the world with wistful, bemused expressions. A gentle sense of humor is frequently apparent in her work. One blue-tailed mermaid adorned in a rainbow-colored vest clearly yearns for love. Slung across her shoulder is a bag labeled "prince bait," and in her open palm is a green glass frog. Perhaps a kiss will break the spell and transform this tiny frog into her prince. Hope springs eternal in the hearts of mermaids.

A gossamer-winged flower fairy perched on driftwood waves a magical

butterfly wand made of shells. Arrayed in a flower cap, purple velvet pantaloons, and woven straw shoes, she emerges from a palm-leaf and fabric scenario embroidered with the words "Love is the key." Part human, part flower, the fairy is distinctly a creature of enchantment. Her hand-beaded white cuffs and delicate, multicolored skirt are testaments to the artist's devotion to detail.

To fashion her fanciful figures, Gardenia uses all-natural materials. All of her dolls are articulated, which means they have jointed bodies that move. The eyes are made with silk embroidery floss and acrylic paint and pencil, and the faces are colored with German dried chalk fixed with fabric spray for permanency. Hair is often made from materials such as dog hair, human hair, llama hair, or yarn. The incorporation of natural and found materials into her work is crucial to Gardenia's creative process, and friends are always stopping by her studio with tiny objects they have found.

Among the many techniques she uses to create her one-of-a-kind dolls are sewing, knitting, crocheting, tatting, fabric painting, dyeing, felting, beading, and sculpting out of clay and wax. Her meticulous attention to detail is one of the reasons her dolls are so remarkable. "I do it all myself; I make my own felt and I make a lot of my own fabrics," says Gardenia.



**An assortment of fabrics, paints, and other supplies stands at the ready as Gardenia works on one of her creations.**

Buzz



Just Cruizing



*"The thing about creating art is that what you're creating comes from your inner being. I can't imagine not being able to do this. It takes you to a different place where you have more time to think and reflect."*

*-Katie Gardenia*



*The Crow Watcher*

"I love detail. I hear a voice in me that says the stitches need to be littler. The smaller and the more detail, the more I'm pleased." She even knits using toothpicks to create the tiniest of garments.

"My dolls are my passion," says Gardenia. "The thing about creating art is that what you're creating comes from your inner being. I can't imagine not being able to do this. It takes you to a different place where you have more time to think and reflect." For the artist, the process of creating the dolls is like being in a meditative state. "My mantra is a selfless heart," she says. "With all the sad things going on in the world, the dolls bring joy to people." She enjoys seeing people of all ages smile when they see her work.

Gardenia estimates that she has probably made somewhere between five thousand and six thousand dolls, which are now in collections all over the world. One Sanibel collector owns forty-eight of her creations. "I never make two alike," she says. She does not do sketches; the dolls evolve organically out of the creative process, and each one has its own unique character. "When I sit and stitch, I really don't know what that doll is going to be," Gardenia says. "Once the face and features are created, I go from there." It usually takes a month or more to craft a doll.

Gardenia started making her doll sculptures after selling the Bubble Room Restaurant on Captiva Island, which she opened in 1979 and ran until 1989. (She also owned and operated Katie Gardenia's Mermaid Kitchen on Sanibel Island from 2001 to 2003.) Well-known for her baking expertise, the San Antonio, Texas, native learned to bake from her grandmother, and her legendary cakes have been the centerpiece of many private parties and public events in Southwest Florida. Though she still whips up her delectable desserts for her business Moon Cakes, Gardenia has more time to spend on her art now that she's no longer a full-time restaurateur.

"What changed my life is making these dolls," says Gardenia, a self-taught artist. "In the restaurant business, I truly became someone I don't want to be. There is no time for self. The restaurant business owns you. You are at the mercy of the public."

Gardenia is a tireless worker who may spend as many as fifteen hours a day creating her sensual blue-haired mermaids languishing in hot tubs and exuberant dancers dressed in tiny vests and top hats. "When I'm creating, I'm not thinking about what's actually going on in the world that I have no control over," she says. "In my fantasy world, I have control over the figures and what



**The self-taught artist and former restaurateur has crafted several thousand of her fanciful dolls, which are inspired by everything from mermaids to Gardenia's friends.**



Flower Faerie

they're doing."

Gardenia draws inspiration for her dolls from many sources. Mermaids, of course, figure largely in her personal mythology. Although she hails from Texas, she is very much a Southwest Floridian who thrives near the water. When she lost her Sanibel home after Hurricane Charley in 2004, she went

back to San Antonio for a while but soon returned to Florida. Her time in Texas and the vibrant Hispanic culture there influenced her colorful Frida Kahlo dolls, and her Frida Kahlo bottle-cap earrings are among her best-selling items at art fairs.

Costumes and characters from Cirque du Soleil have also provided inspiration for her fantasy creatures. And many of her dolls have a medieval fairy-tale quality about them; sometimes it seems that some of her characters have just wandered in from an enchanted forest or descended from a castle tower. Friends have also been the models for some of her work. Musician Gaye Levine, who passed away in May of 2007, was the inspiration for one of Gardenia's fabulous dolls.

Love of creativity appears to be the guiding force of Gardenia's life. In her long and varied career she has restored and redecorated twenty-eight homes in addition to creating several restaurants. She has designed handbags in San Antonio, read palms on Captiva, and continually delighted those around her with her love of fantasy and her amazing dedication to detail. She also adores dancing and is willing and ready to create a costume for any event. Needless to say, she has always had a lot of energy and an endless supply of ideas.

Gardenia's work has been shown in numerous galleries, museums, and juried art shows. Now residing in a St. James City cottage on Pine Island, she also teaches felt- and doll-making at her studio and at Big Arts on Sanibel. Her latest project finds her collaborating with artist and writer Robin Harvey on a children's environmental book based on Gardenia's pixie-figure characters. Each sculptured figure is designed to be photographed for a series of "photopaintings," which will also be filmed for an animated DVD. The original pixie soft sculptures will be part of a traveling collection that will support educational and environmental programs.

In making her fantasy world real, she hopes to draw other people into it. "I truly want to live in a fairy land," admits Gardenia. "Through my dolls I can live vicariously!"

*Katie Gardenia's dolls can be seen at the Tower Gallery (751 Tarpon Bay Road, Sanibel, 239-472-4557) and at her Gallery Studio at The Griffin (4303 Pine Island Road, Matlacha, 239-246-0389). She can be contacted by e-mail at [katiegardenia@embarqmail.com](mailto:katiegardenia@embarqmail.com).*

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Someday Fish Will Come

Red Fish Blue Fish

