CREATIVE COMPOSITIONS

Four makers create decorative and functional art using a variety of uncommon findings

Above: Mixed-media artist Jennifer Griffin utilizes upcycled and vintage items when making her creations, such as this group of decorative bottles. Photo credits: Jennifer Griffin
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"I love the thrill of the hunt," says mixed-media artist Jennifer Griffin. With a love of antique, ancient, and vintage items, Griffin fuses her love of upcycled items with nature to create unique, breathtaking hairpieces, jewelry, accessories, and mixed-media artwork. "I love that previously owned items have a history — a story. They have been places and have seen things, so to speak," she says. "Using vintage and antique items means that the pieces can't be duplicated. They are exclusive. No one else in the world will have a piece that is the same as yours."

Griffin is a multi-talented mixed-media artist. With a self-taught background in interior design, art, and photography, she comments: "With most design and art, there are basic principles that apply to any medium. The rule of thirds applies, for example, to home interiors as it does to photography, as well as visual art, such as oil painting or mixed-media on canvas. I combine colors and textures on canvas, or box, or whatever strikes my fancy."

Inspired by her senses — music, nature, or a simple hug from her children, Griffin translates her emotions into intricate stories through visual imagery and three-dimensional art. As an example, five years ago she crafted a set of moss hair clips for a photo shoot she was working on with her middle daughter. "I was craving something different," she says. "Up until that point I had been creating typical boutique hair accessories — which honestly didn't fit me or my girls. I wasn't putting my product on my own child."

Griffin explains this led her to create something different and special. "At the time, my daughter was struggling with making friends as well as just being OK with who she was. Our conversations inspired me to create a character based on my daughter," she continues.

Above: Griffin's “Fairy Potion Book” artfully stores collectible potion bottles.
Captivated by the fantasy and the sci-fi look, Griffin set out to adorn her daughter in an elfish fashion. “I made her very earthly and natural. That’s where those hair clips were born from,” she describes.

It wasn’t long and Griffin stopped focusing on making children’s accessories, largely due to stringent safety standard regulations. “In the U.S., if you sell children’s products, you must have a CPC, or Children’s Product Certificate issued to every product made,” she explains. “Since nearly all of my items are one-of-a-kind, it would require me to send every single item to a lab for testing in order for it to be compliant with the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. This is not something that any business could afford to do.”

Griffin does say if a customer wants an item made for a child, she will still do so, but advises them the item does not have a CPC. Since growing her Etsy business in 2011, she has added many different items which have earned a strong following of collectors. “My steampunk fascinators are popular with the themed wedding crowd,” she says.

Guided imagery is behind every single piece handcrafted by Griffin: “I think that expressing myself and what I feel and think in an image speaks to people. I have had clients tell me when they look at my pieces or wear them it makes them feel a certain way. For some it is hope and others gratitude. For some it’s a matter of seeing a visual of how they see themselves,” she contemplates.

Griffin creates all of her headpieces with a character in mind, and those characters are based on the realities of life. She photographs the hairpieces on models, projecting a specific vision. “Some images go even further to be used in canvas pieces or inspiration for a sculpture,” she says. One project entailed photographing a model in an ivy and moss headdress and dress based on a mixed-media sculpture she had made earlier with paper clay and tree bark. “The sculpture sold as well as the dress and headdress. Each piece of the puzzle reached different people,” says Griffin.

Of course, creating art is only one aspect of running a successful handmade business. Difficult for Griffin is paperwork and accounting: “I love creating and I love photography, but those darn numbers and SEO tag words just get me.” Another challenge is when she is asked by a customer to recreate something. “It isn’t easy for me,” says Griffin. “Nothing ever turns out exactly like the original. I am a details person, so that really bothers me. I feel like I am trying to recreate a memory or a feeling. It just feels unnatural.”

Beyond her children — the artist is a mother first — the most important thing about sharing her work with others is letting people know they are not alone. “There are other people out there that understand and can share in the heartache and joy of life. If I can create a special piece for someone that brings them hope, then my job is complete. If a bride feels how extraordinary she really is because she is wearing a piece that no one else in the world has, then I have done what I have set out to do.”

**Artist Advice: Jennifer Griffin**

- The numbers aspect of a creative business is important; get help — it’s worth the investment.
- Be patient with yourself and your business.
- The most important — don’t give up. Surround yourself with people who will spur you on and encourage you to push forward.

**Left:** The elegant “Flower Butterfly” necklace incorporates an upcycled brooch, brass leaves, and pearls.

**Right:** One of Griffin’s favorite things to create are altered boxes, which is inspired by her love of the fantasy world.

**Below:** The “Once Upon a Time” Necklace is comprised of upcycled clock parts, antique silver accents, and other oddities; the look is decidedly steampunk.
“Glass is fragile — like life, and I’m drawn to the delicate hand it takes to work with this amazing material,” says Dorothy “Dossie” Garvey, of St. Simons, Florida. Garvey creates hand painted decorative windows, pet treat jars, ornaments, decanters, and pet memorials.

“I get inspired everyday by things I see,” the artist explains. “One of the most important things about my artwork is the joy it brings to pet owners who have lost their pets. They are in such despair and are so grateful to have just a little reminder of the pet they loved and lost. The emails from my customers just about break my heart, but it feels good to have helped them deal with their loss in some way.”

Garvey’s most popular items are the glass windows she paints. “They go in, they go out, and repeat!” she exclaims. “To capture these brief moments while your pets are waiting for you, I create a personalized window. My hand painted window sash is designed to show your pet’s love, loyalty, and playful side. It’s a constant reminder that you are their everything and they wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The artist says that aside from her pet portraits, items such as treat jars are great sellers and make perfect gifts for a new pet, housewarming, or even for your pet’s groomer as a tip jar.

Garvey says she uses a mixture of styles when painting pet portraits on windows: “I want them to be as realistic as possible and to express the pet’s personality — sometimes joyful and silly — sometimes very grumpy. I like the portraits to be dynamic, eye-catching, and bring a smile and sweet memory to the viewer.”

The artist explains that painting on glass has many challenges; she developed a method using special paint glass that remains permanent and glossy. Her most memorable test was the first window Garvey ever created. Taking a shredded mimeographed copy of an old photo of her great-grandfather’s home in 1896 New Jersey, she painted the image on the window so it looked like the viewer was looking across the street to the family home. “The family had just moved over from Ireland and this was their first footprint planted in the U.S. I had to use artistic license, but it is pretty close to the original home,” she remembers.

While Garvey has operated her handmade business for the past 20 years, she worked at another job until she retired last year to pursue art full-time. At a young age she attended three years of art school, but has been mostly self-taught all her life. In her previous career she worked in bookkeeping and accounting, but her artistic side was always present and shining — even through personal hardship.

“As a cancer survivor, my priorities changed and I decided to establish myself as a working artist while giving back to the community that is my customers,” Garvey says. “During the housing crisis of 2008-2010, we all had our issues — some worse than others. I had been reading about the affect the crisis had on charities and how donations had dwindled to a dangerous point.”

While she was struggling herself, Garvey felt the need to help others and decided to make art donations for rescue organizations. “For a few hours of work, a pet somewhere could have a meal or medical attention, because every little bit helps. Children and pets are the innocent; they need us to be there for them in any way that we can,” Garvey says.

Looking back, the philanthropic artist began selling her artwork at local art and craft shows with her sister and then set up a website and an Etsy shop. “At Etsy I have found a venue that has been very successful for my business and a community of informative and knowledgeable sellers,” she adds. Garvey also sells on Amazon handmade and is in the process of updating her website.

“Running a business takes an incredible amount of time and attention,” she attests. Garvey started out by researching small businesses, goal-setting, and developing a product line for a specific market using her artistic talent. “The most difficult thing about starting a business is making the commitment to constantly learn, work really hard and smart, be forgiving to yourself, and see the challenges ahead as a way to make a difference in your life — and hopefully in others.”
When there are just not enough hours in the day, Heather Shore of Sterling, Illinois, just crams more art into it. A high school advanced placement (AP) art, graphic design, and computer graphics teacher — as well as department chair — by day, a solo artist by night, and a busy mom 24-7, Shore knows no sleep. "We must practice what we preach to our students. Furthermore, being an artist who presents and sells work improves my skill and my instruction in the classroom. I don't think you have to sell your work to be an artist, but I do think selling your work makes you a better artist because it forces you to work outside the vacuum of your studio," she explains. "You have to discuss your work, reflect on how it is perceived, and reconcile what it is communicating. I push my students to speak about and think deeply about their art."

While Shore has spent the better part of her adult life teaching grade- and high-school children the fundamentals of art, she is on a continual path of learning and self-expression through her own art. Eight years ago, a local gallery approached her and asked if she would participate in the fundraising event, "Art for Art Sake." At this event, artists shared a makeshift studio and the community was able to observe the artists create their work over the course of two days. Afterwards, the artwork was auctioned off and the proceeds benefitted the gallery.

"I had been saving a bunch of magazine articles about the Arab Spring — a topic I was very consumed with at the time; I decided to meditate while there and create a mandala to help myself better understand the people of this culturally significant event, especially

Below: Each mandala created by artist Heather Shore is truly one-of-a-kind and never duplicated.
Above from left: Statement jewelry pieces, such as necklaces and earrings, are a way Shore's customers can wear her exquisite artwork. • Even in abstract designs, Shore often marries birds and other nature-inspired elements to her mandalas.

Artist Advice: Heather Shore
- Check your ego at the door and listen to your customers.
- If you are selling online, social media is key; if you don't have a social media presence it's very hard to expand beyond your local community.
- Have a variety of price points; I want there to be something for everyone in my line from $2 buttons and magnets to $1,500 artwork for the serious collector.

the women, many of whom were speaking out for the first time in their lives,” Shore recalls. Well received by the public, the artist started to work on mandalas in her home studio as personal therapy. “I quickly became obsessed with using the artistic process as a means of meditation and personal development,” she says.

While in college, Shore began to study other religions; after the birth of her first son, she began to study Buddhism, which uses the mandala as a form of meditation. Shore grew up with the Catholic Church and remembers being mesmerized by the beautiful rose windows and stained glass: she decided to weave them together into her artwork. “My works are a melding of those two religions,” she states.

Shore is quick to explain that her fascination with mandalas is not unique, and says that creating radial designs dates back to early man, showing up in most religions and cultures. “Most children, without prompting, will draw circles in their earliest stages of development. Therapists have used mandalas for decades in helping individuals deal with tragedy and stress. Making them makes me feel good — it really is that simple,” she says.

Shore says she feels especially connected to fellow women and has spent significant time investigating female stereotypes and advocating for their rights through her artwork. “Some of my mandalas are inspired by women who have played a positive role in my life, while others are inspired by those who have been less than positive,” she says. “In our current cultural climate it seems everyone has strong opinions on women — the roles we play in government, our society, and in our families.”

Since she first began creating mandalas, Shore continues to utilize magazine paper along with acrylic paint in her artwork. Looking closely, one can pick out motifs in her abstract designs, such as birds and flowers.

“Although there are many artists who use magazine paper for collage work, I do not know of any artists who combine the paper along with acrylic paint in quite the way I do,” she explains. Shore’s methods incorporate paper with acrylic washes as well as hand-applied pigments. “My using only small snippets of the paper, along with areas of acrylic wash, create the illusion of colored glass.”

She continues: “People are often astounded when they discover it is made out paper. The human brain is an amazing thing, but it’s also amazing how easily it can be fooled, and how often it sees what it wants to.”

Shore’s designs and sales are seasonal in nature; she often can’t keep up with jewelry production for summer sales, and in the winter months she is busy selling wine glasses and stoppers. Her sales of original artwork, including her mandalas, are consistent throughout the year, with a slight uptick before Christmas. She adds that the majority of her sales are from economically priced functional items. “I believe that people love them because although they are purchasing a less expensive reproduction of my work, they still feel like they are buying a piece of art,” she muses. “We all love to surround ourselves with beautiful things.”

The optimistic artist says finding balance when running a handmade business is important — and a challenge. “There are only so many hours in the day,” she smiles. “I have spent many nights going into my studio after I have put my kids to bed, working until 1 a.m., only to get up again at six to do it all over again.”
A self-taught artist in business for six years, Juli Steel creates uncommon mixed-media assemblage art utilizing vintage and upcycled items. “I have a deep attachment to the old, damaged, and forgotten,” she says. “Every piece of what some people may call junk has a story to tell. I love antique stores and flea markets.”

When Steel started her business, she found establishing an Etsy store was an easy platform to begin with. The desire to create her work for profit full-time was her motivator. Her inspiration comes largely from empathy. “Empathy for others can be haunting at times; it is very difficult not to think about making a piece if I know it will touch a person and possibly bring a smile to them or help bring peace in any way,” she says.

Steel’s most popular items are her steampunk-style birds mounted on vintage items. “I would say overall my art pieces with wood hands are very popular, as I think it really helps people connect to things going on in their lives,” she explains. It can take the artist anywhere from a few days to several weeks to complete. “Hours can be spent just thinking about how I want to incorporate items into the piece,” she says.

The artist says the items that are the most challenging are custom orders. “With no knowledge of the person I’m creating it for puts a lot of weight on my shoulders,” Steel says. “I want to create a piece that reflects the personality of the buyer.”

When it comes to running her handmade business, Steel says the biggest obstacle to overcome was finding the confidence to put her art out in the world for all to see. “I still find it difficult to keep up with listings, receipts, and other paperwork,” she relates.
Above: Mixed-media sculptures incorporating hands are a good seller for artist Juli Steel.

Below: The innuendos are many in this unique sculpture by Steel.

Most importantly, the Fort Worth, Texas-based artist says: “It feels wonderful to see the look on a person’s face when they fall in love with a piece of my art. I know then it was worth making it just for them.”

Artist Advice: Juli Steel

• If possible, list new items daily.
• Put yourself out there on social media — it’s a great tool!
• Take pride in your work — you are worth it!
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