



HOLY DOLLS
Artist Kelly Buntin Johnson (left) concentrates her eyes and hands on the intricate bead work of creating Munecos Santos or Holy Dolls. Each is an historical saint, only with more modern, contemporary jobs or miracles to perform. One such Holy Doll is Saint Gabriel (shown here).



INTERCESSORS
In recent years, Kelly has found an outlet for her environmental concerns. Endangered species become animal intercessors (left) to bring their plight to the attention of human beings.

THE STUDIO
Kelly (below) works in her studio starting at 5:30 a.m. She is surrounded by articles that inspire her art, including her own intricate bead work of Our Lady of Mercy at the Border (bottom).

Kelly Buntin Johnson's

ART with a Cause



Story and photos by Bill Hankins

Faces stare back from every corner of Kelly Buntin Johnson's second floor artist's studio--faces of the religious, of the funny, of the famous, and of the ordinary. The eyes on those faces seem to know that magic happens in this room that is layered wall to wall with art, books, figures of cloth and wood and metal.

The dozens of vintage sock monkeys--a fraternity of the saved and salvaged--seem to acknowledge that this place is spe-

cial; a place where beads and leather, cloth and thread can become talismans of a spiritual journey.

It is on that journey--as inanimate objects become art with a story to tell--that the magic takes place right in front of those watchful eyes. It is magic at the fingertips of the 42-year-old Dearborn, Missouri artist.

On the northern Platte County acreage she shares with

• Story continued on next page



VARIETIES OF ART

Kelly's art fills her life whether (from left) in her kitchen, in boxes and boxes of saved vintage cloth, in her collection of old sock monkeys, in teaching two young boys interested in her Intercessors, or in her own personal style.



fellow artist and husband, Rhett Johnson, Kelly has created a national reputation for her intricate beadwork. She creates faces that express the emotional and spiritual concerns she has for the world. Kelly's hopes are that her Holy Dolls and Intercessor figures of endangered species will work their magic on a troubled world.

"People need to walk in others' shoes," Kelly explains. "They need to develop tolerance, empathy, and understanding."

By taking the Saints and giving them new, contemporary jobs, Kelly hopes to give viewers of her art something tangible upon which to meditate. In fact, her one-woman exhibit at Christian Brothers University in Memphis late last year was entitled "Tangible Meditation."

"My goal is to cause the viewer/reader to pause in meditation and to see the messages portrayed in a new light," she says.

The Holy Dolls and her endangered species Intercessors are messengers that come to Earth to give guidance and advice, according to Kelly.

Last fall, Kelly was selected as Artist-in-Residence at the Johnson County Library. This honor allowed her to share her art as well as her technique in a variety of venues. She talked to middle school and high school art classes, demonstrated her work at various libraries, and made slide presentations for a number of groups.

Because she was working and demonstrating her art in Kansas, Kelly wanted to create pieces that were pertinent to the state. She chose to create Intercessor figures that were struggling in Kansas. She chose both the prairie dog and the ferret because, as she explains, "they are dependent on each other for survival."

"The black-eyed ferret is almost extinct and they depend on the prairie dogs, but they are being killed off," Kelly explains. She thinks showing the plight of these native animals to her Johnson County audience helped bring the message home.

She also enjoyed talking to the young people who showed an interest both in her art and in the cause of helping endangered species. One of the art teachers designed a project where her 7th-8th graders had to make a creature out of a shoe. After seeing Kelly's work, she decided to gear the project toward endangered species.

"I enjoyed working in front of people," Kelly says. "It was fun to see the kids and let them hold the pieces. The high school kids listened well to having a body of work with a message."

Kelly has been creating art professionally for 25 years and has work displayed and sold in museums and galleries from New York City to Santa Fe, New Mexico. However, working in front of people, as she did as Artist-in-Residence, was a new experience.

Typically, her work schedule is a solo act, rigid and spartan. She is up and in her studio at 5:30 every morning with a pot of green tea. She works until 7:30 when she stops to go back to the house to have breakfast with Rhett, usually homemade granola.

"The first two hours of the morning are the best time for work," Kelly says. She sits on a rigid wooden chair at a table with a strong work light attached. She bought the chair at an auction in St. Joseph from two older ladies who used it in front of their dressing table.

Like so much in Kelly's life and art, the chair is a way of recycling pieces that were once important in someone's life.

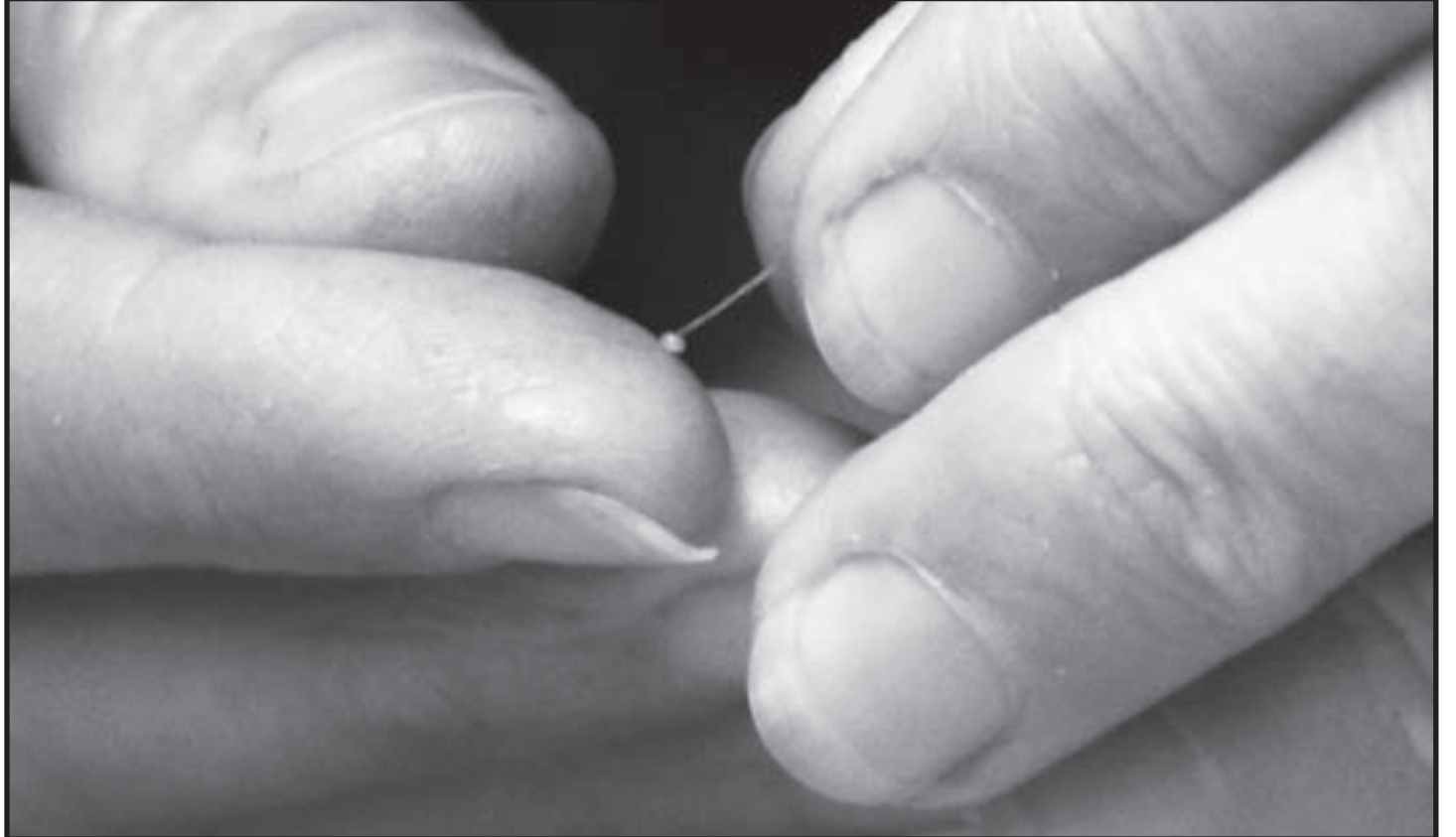
"I prefer furniture that has a history, that someone has owned," she

SEED BEADS

With the help of thread coated with bee's wax, Kelly is able to string together the tiniest of beads. The downside is hundreds of hours of work. The upside is that the tiny beads allow Kelly to contour and highlight the faces of her figures, making them even more expressive, like Raphael's face (below). The seed beads are so valuable, Kelly keeps them ready to move to the storm cellar if necessary.

WORK STATION

Once the body of the figure is done, the bead work is not (below right). Outer garments often take as much time to bead as the faces. Kelly's artist sister Lori says that Kelly's art invites the viewer to come closer and examine more. That examination, she says, is rewarded. "Her work is amazing."



says. "Most of my clothes are vintage. I guess it is my version of recycling."

After breakfast, she is back at it from 9 until noon when she goes in to prepare the couples' big meal of the day. In the afternoon she works from 2-5 at which time she quits to do an hour of yoga, which helps to counter the intense hours she has spent with her bead work.

Several years ago, Kelly and Rhett decided that they had to punch out on the "artists' clock" by 6 p.m. Otherwise, they admit, they could both work on art all evening.

Kelly likes to leave the evening hours for reading and research, which are big parts of her creative process. But her art is never far from her mind, nor Rhett's. They will bounce ideas off each other, tapping into the other's creative vision.

"Art is my life," Kelly says. "It is always here, not a separate entity. You do laundry, clean house and you are thinking of things to write. Even if I am picking tomatoes or peas, I am still meditating about the art. I don't turn it on and off."

Recently, while cooking a new lunch dish for Rhett to try, Kelly admitted that when she leaves the studio for the kitchen, it is not really a transition in her day.

"Cooking is an art as well. I take recipes and tweak them. I like to eat really good food so I cook it, too. A good meal is an inspiration to me."

For Kelly, moving from the studio to the kitchen is simply a move from one form of art to another. The kitchen allows her to "cleanse the mind and cogitate on art projects and news stories while preparing our meals," she says.

"It also gives my wrists and hands a rest from beading," Kelly adds.

So, much like her artwork, Kelly makes everything from scratch in her kitchen. That means lots of gardening and shopping every Saturday at the City Market.

At certain times of the year, the gardening competes with time in the studio. August is tomato month, and last year Rhett's dad, Donovan, had put in 100 plants to go with Kelly's 25 heirloom varieties.

Tomato harvest was a full scale operation, but Kelly didn't mind.

"It is part of the lifestyle we've chosen--to have the fresh food."

Part of that life style which suits Kelly and Rhett just fine is being married to a fellow artist. Besides getting to share ideas and, as Rhett says, getting the best meals around, the couple will collaborate on some art that they sell locally at Stuff, a gallery in Brookside, and Missouri Bluffs in Weston.

Kelly created art out of vintage post cards and beadwork while Rhett created the exterior globes and backing to make ornaments, medallions, or jewelry. These latest pieces had a Valentine's Day theme.

"We do things to help pay the bills," Kelly says.

"We primarily were making things we thought would sell," Rhett adds. "After a while you add a certain level of sophistication."

Working together and just knowing what the other is going through are perks to their lives.

"If not married to someone who knows the trials of the art world, I think it would be terribly difficult," Rhett says.

Both artists are self-trained and have watched the other's development over the years.

"In 25 years of marriage, Kelly has gone to a completely different level," Rhett explains. "There is nothing else to compare her to."

"The thing I admire is that there are few people who research as much as Kelly. When you see what she creates it is astounding, but when you realize all the hours . . . well, the visual part is just the tip of the iceberg," Rhett says. "Intellectually and aesthetically it is astounding."



Another artist who has special insight into Kelly's unique work is her sister Lori, a master painter in Kansas City.

Like Kelly, she grew up in Dearborn where their parents Louis and Sandy Buntin and grandmother Mary still live. Lori, however, followed a more academic artistic path than her self-taught sister. She admits being very proud of where her sister is artistically.

"Kelly's work invites you to get closer and then reveals its message. It is subtle, intimate, and inviting. There is nothing else like it out there," Lori says.

She cites the perfect balance of form and content as Kelly's way of giving the Holy Dolls and Intercessors a kind of wholeness that not many artists achieve.

"Her work looks like it is made in another time or culture," Lori adds. "It is a key to her work."

Another key is discipline, which Lori saw in her sister at an early age.

"When we would go trick or treating, Kelly would stretch her candy out for a month while mine would be gone in days. She was strong-willed and had a mind-set even then," Lori says.

"I don't know of anyone with her level of discipline. She knows that hard work pays off."

Like making her Halloween candy last, Kelly has a pattern to how she works one of her figures from start to finish.

Research is the starting point, but once she is at her studio work table, the face gets priority. Kelly uses buffalo hide here because it holds the beads flat.

"It is a bit scary at this point because if you don't like the face, you can't erase it, not after 40 hours of work," Kelly says.

Kelly researches faces in books and for her three angels--Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael--she searched through several books on the Byzantine Empire.

The eyes are the starting point on the face, then nose, cheeks, lips, chin, forehead.

"If I get the eyes right, I know I have a good start," Kelly says.

Raphael is her most recent Holy Doll, and for him, Kelly used the tiniest seed beads for his face. The holes are so small that no needle will fit through so Kelly uses bee's wax to smooth the thread and works the beads on intricately with her fingers. The threaded beads are attached to the

**DIADEM
(HEAD BAND)**
3 hours

HAIR
27 hours

RAPHAEL
whose new job is to be healer of the Earth, in particular of the oceans of the world.

ARTISTIC CONCERNS

Kelly's world view includes (from left) concern for the plight of Native American prisoner Leonard Peltier for whom she created a piece of art, preserving the traditions of Native American bead work, and the artistic interests of Rhett, whom she rewards with a homemade pie.



FACE
25 hours

RESEARCH
25 hours

**WRITE
MESSAGE**
8 hours

**DALMATIC
(OUTER GARMENT)**
37 hours

STAFF
5 1/2 hours

**TUNICA
(INNER GARMENT)**
10 hours

BODY
20 hours

**EMBROIDERED,
BEADED DOILY
(FOR BASE)**
34 hours

**LOROS
(SCARF PIECE)**
26 hours

BOOTS
5 hours

**WINGS,
NIMBUS,
BASE**
6 hours
(4-Rhett; 2-Kelly)

“I should be committed.”
KELLY
ON THE AMOUNT OF TIME HER ART TAKES

leather by yet more thread.

“It is a private satisfaction to get the right expression across with the tiny beads,” Kelly says. “Keeping the beads straight, especially with such small beads, is difficult. Most people think there is glue involved.”

Her faces often need several shades of beads to provide the proper shadowing and detail. Kelly sometimes finds it hard to find the right shade of brown.

Bead sources for Kelly are usually Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and even Nigeria. The source for horse hair is a little easier: Rhett's sister's horse.

The face is attached to the body which is made of doe skin, which she gets from a taxidermy in Minnesota.

The backing and undergarments can take 100 hours, even though Kelly knows people may not look at that part of her art.

“I don't cut corners,” Kelly says.

The outer garments are recycled pieces of the vintage material Kelly has been collecting since she was in high school. These garments also take beadwork as Kelly tries to match the style to images she has researched.

Part of the wholeness to Kelly's art is the written message that accompanies each figure. To Kelly it is as important as the figure itself. She thinks it will take her at least two days to write Raphael's message, which Kelly will update to make him the healer of the Earth, in particular of oceans.

Kelly has come a long way since her early days of doing restorative beading on Native American artifacts for collectors. She had first been inspired to teach herself beading when her parents took her to the Sacred Circle Exhibit at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in the 1970s.

“It was like a punch in the gut,” Kelly says.

That exhibit and her early work in restoration taught her to always treat cultural pieces, even the works of anonymous crafts persons, with respect. She continues that respect to this day.

Kelly and Lori both look back at their small town upbringing and the freedom their parents gave them as important to their development.

“As musicians,” Lori says, “they understood making things and they exposed us to that and the arts. Also, we could run free in a small town



AN ENDANGERED FAMILY

Kelly's Intercensors of endangered species seem to be gathering for a group shot in the Johnson living room before, perhaps, heading out to tell the world of their plight. Hoping to place her art in museums or in a book before selling them to interested patrons, Kelly will keep only one figure herself--The Pink-headed Duck (second from left).

all day and come home in time for supper. That allowed our imagination to run free.”

Today, Kelly's mind is always at work and receptive to inspiration which comes in many forms.

She listens to National Public Radio and the BBC on her radio to keep tabs on the world. She keeps scraps of paper by her as she beads to jot down ideas and inspirations.

“The bottom line is that inspiration comes in many forms and smells and tastes and sounds for me all day long,” Kelly says. “The key is to keep my head clear.”

Lists of the everyday things help her to do that: clean house, laundry, pick tomatoes, make pesto, pay bills, photograph artwork and send out photos to galleries and clients.

Putting those items to paper frees her mind to follow the arc of the day all the way to sunset, which Kelly admits is a daily inspiration.

Kelly remembers a time in high school when her dad, who was

also interested in antiques, took her to a lady's house who was selling her grandmother's quilts. Kelly recalls being shocked that these treasures would really be sold.

“To her they were mundane, but to me I thought you should honor things that people spent hours making,” Kelly says.

The experience opened her eyes to how everyday items could have special, sacred meanings.

“That was a special moment for me,” Kelly says.

It was a moment that forecast the climate of her current art.

“It all wraps itself together. Using vintage materials, honoring traditions,” Kelly says. “It is all wrapped up in one.”

As Raphael evolves into his final status as a Holy Doll, Kelly is beginning work on a new job she contracted for with the Wyandotte County Museum.

“I bid a job to create a Hopewell garment for a mannequin. The garment

NO BANKERS' HOURS

As husband Rhett's light comes on in the house at 6 a.m., Kelly is already hard at work in her second floor studio. Arriving at 5:30, she makes her hot tea and begins the hours of beading as the sun just begins to rise.

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

At a branch of the Johnson County Library, Kelly discusses her work with several interested patrons. During September, Kelly was the Artist-in-Residence at the Library.



will reflect what a man is wearing in a painting they own,” Kelly says. “An interesting project.”

Since the museum does not have the mannequin yet, Kelly foresees yet another collaboration with Rhett; this time as a model for the garment.

“I think Rhett is about the right size,” Kelly says, smiling.

She reveals this new information to Rhett after he has eaten one of her lunches that she created from scratch. It was followed by a homemade peach pie.

After cleaning up the lunch dishes, Kelly will be back out to her studio for three more hours of intense beadwork. She will take her small breaks every hour, but Kelly admits she wouldn't want it any other way.

“I could do this 24 hours a day,” Kelly says of her art work. “I force myself to get up once an hour and rest my eyes, (but) if I didn't have to cook or garden or go to the store, you would have to pull me out of this chair.”★