An Artist's Portal to Creativity

Sculptor/designer Peggy Snider follows her muse

By Robin Shepherd

Walking through Peggy Snider's lush backyard sculpture garden to her busy art studio at her Westside home, it's obvious that her everyday life and her work are inseparable. It has been that way since she was a rambunctious child. Back then, her godfather, painter Bill Larkin, wanted to get her to calm down long enough to paint her portrait, so he handed her a sheaf of paper, some brushes, and a few tubes of paint. That was all it took to unleash her beautiful life of creative artistry.

"I was an incredibly shy kid, but with encouragement from my family I somehow mounted a one-girl show of my oil paintings," Snider said. "I think I was only six or seven years old at the time." Later she would earn degrees in set design and painting at Bennington College. While studying there, she took a semester off as the entire college closes work for the winter months, to work as an apprentice on Broadway doing set design for playwright Arthur Miller and director/producer Elia Kazan.

"I thought I'd make my career in my home state of New York," Snider said, "but it was the late Sixties and San Francisco was calling my name. I could not refuse." She landed a job as set designer with the San Francisco Mime Troupe, a groundbreaking artists' collective, in 1969. Five years later she co-founded the Pickle Family Circus with her husband, Larry Pisoni, and took the show on the road with their children Gypsy and Lorenzo performing by their side. "We traveled all over," she said. "It was a great way to raise the kids."

For nearly twenty years Snider ran the company, performed, and served as the designer-in-residence. She also designed sets and costumes for Berkeley Rep and other theater companies, along with movies such as "Popeye," "Patch Adams," "Bicentennial Man," "Sphere," "Matrix II," and "Matrix III." She also worked on the "Nash Bridges" TV series.

(Right) Snider's southern-facing, passive-solar home overlooks her sculpture garden and Monterey Bay.
(Inset) "Lady Liberty from Snider's Furies series."
(Above) Sunlight streams into the home’s creatively decorated living room. (Right) A piece for Snider’s totem series “Once Upon a Time” graces a place in the living room.

During the Eighties, Snider’s interest turned rather abruptly to sculpture. She and Pisoni had parted ways and she had a studio in San Francisco’s Hunters Point neighborhood. Over time she became immersed in her new creative focus and her friends. In particular, she grew closer to Albert Adato, a businessman and environmental activist who would later become her husband. Their marriage prompted her move to Santa Cruz, where they enjoyed many years together before his passing in 2007. The focal point of their home’s entryway is a portrait of Adato and his son Marc, done in pastels by Portland artist Kitty Wallis, formerly of Santa Cuz.

“Albie was my muse,” Snider said. “There’s not a day that I don’t think about him. He’s very much in this house. In fact, he literally built it with his poker buddies. He even hired one of their wives, architect Stephanie Barnes Castro, to design the house.”

The multi-level home’s layout is very open yet solidly built, using a variety of wood both inside and out. The exterior siding is cedar, for example, while the interior stairs and railings are made of walnut. In the cozy kitchen, recessed lighting brings out the beauty of the custom grain-matched cherry cabinets, accented by granite counters. A

(Above) Peggy Snider and Larry Pisoni juggling during a performance of Pickle Family Circus, which she co-founded in 1974. (Right) Displayed prominently in the home’s entry is a pastel by artist Kitty Wallis of Al Adato, Peggy’s late husband and creator of the home, with his son Marc Adato.
(Above) The beautifully-landscaped sculpture garden features numerous examples of Snider's sculpture. (Left) A sampling of a few of the sculptures that inhabit the home's garden.

wooden breakfast bar adjoins the kitchen, which overlooks the dining room.

Sculptures surround the dining room’s focal point, a glass and stone table by Richard Deutsch, which rests on a Persian Gabbeh tribal carpet. Sunlight streams through the south-facing floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating the warm wood tones and passively heating the slate floors, which were imported from China. French doors open the dining room to a redwood deck that provides a distant view of Monterey Bay while overlooking the sculpture garden.

Snider designed the garden and filled it with her sculptures, each with its own story. With Adato's blessing, she transformed the backyard—originally a bare field—into a beautiful meditative garden space. Snider hand-cut granite rock and laid paving stones in a meandering trail of base rock and sand. The footpaths wind their way around raised beds of herbs and native flowering plants, bountiful fruit trees, and of course, Snider's sculptures. She also installed a wood frame gazebo.

Located apart from the home is Snider's studio and gallery, which is filled with natural light, spacious and inviting. Colorful pots of glaze, a collection of tools, and a wide range of her work surround multiple worktables.
The electric kiln in one corner of the workspace seems small considering the large size of many of Snider's sculptures, but she uses a technique that allows her to fire many smaller individual pieces to create one large sculpture.

The sculptures vary as much in mood and meaning as they do in size. Some are small enough to fit in the palm of your hand while others are life size. The “White Album” represents work done during Adato’s last days and the mourning period that followed. Other pieces have a mystical, fairytale quality about them. “Once Upon a Time” and “Transformation” convey themes of mountains to be scaled, keys to be found so that a door can be opened, and dragons to be evaded in order to reach the stars. One has to walk slowly around these sculptures in order to fully appreciate them, taking time to notice the clues to the story brought forth from the clay.

In January 2017, a decade after her husband’s passing, Snider’s muse returned—but this time it came to express an altogether different mood in a new political series she calls, “The Furies.”

“In Homer’s Iliad, the Furies take vengeance on men who threaten truth and justice,” Snider said, noting that the Furies are dedicated to the betterment of mankind. “Ever since the inauguration, seeing how our great but fragile democracy is under siege, I’ve taken my fury into the studio to create hope. Now my studio is filled with more than