

Award-winning Colorado Springs assemblage artist makes memorable pieces out of junk

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Every day is a carefully organized treasure hunt in Michelle Bracewell's art studio.

Meticulously labeled glass jars of baby doll parts, lace, rhinestones, pearls and vintage lady heads line the shelves. Designated plastic bins hold medium and large dog figurines, beads, crowns, metal eyes, metal animals, plastic and resin animals, ribbons and rosaries.

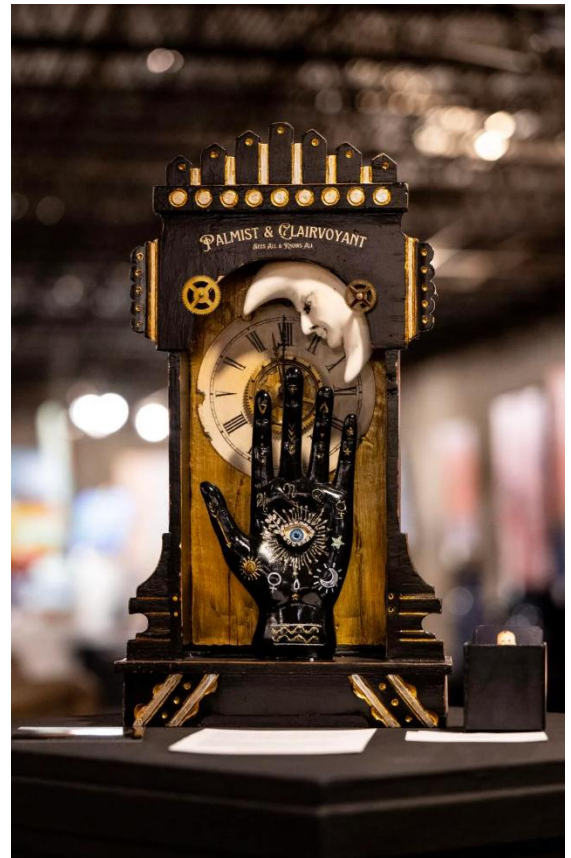
One look at her vintage mixed-media assemblage pieces and you can understand her need to know exactly what she has and where it is.

She's unafraid to solder or use a Dremel or a grinder to cut up all the flotsam and jetsam she buys here, there and everywhere. Or operate the big drill press in her backyard.

"I collect stuff, set it out and one day I look at it and say I know what I'm going to do with that," said the Colorado Springs artist. "I have all the stuff around me and it'll just come together."

Lately, the spirited artist is particularly excited about the large clock case she scored at an estate sale she found on Facebook.

"It was a hoarder house," she said. "I can't see the floor or the counters and I'm like yes, because this means they're desperate and I can get good deals on stuff. But you're going to get dirty."





She spied the gorgeous, old clock that now rests on a work table. The price was right, but the sellers told her she had to pry it off the wall herself. So she procured a ladder, climbed up and yanked it down.

"It weighed a ton," she said. "This was a find of the century. You don't find these like this."

After a Google image search revealed it to be a Vienna antique clock case from 1890, she removed the clock, with plans to sell it, took out the glass, and gave it a good sanding and a dose of Danish oil. And now the restored piece of wood will help complete a piece she's been working on for months, as a home to a doll she made out of antique parts.

"Some people who consider themselves assemblage artists would glue stuff together," Bracewell said. "That's not my thing. I have to alter it and I like to use vintage or antiques and recycled stuff whenever possible. But I have to make it my own. If it's going to be art it has to be transformed. I have to give it new life."

Bracewell's eclectic, whimsical and thoughtful works decorate the walls and cover the surfaces of her home, all sourced from her junking escapades at estate sales, thrift stores, Facebook Marketplace, an architectural salvage place in Florence, and Resourceful Santa Fe, a thrift and art supply store in New Mexico.

Over the last two years, they've migrated their way into exhibits and collections around the state, including **"50% of the Story: Women Expressing Creativity," the new permanent exhibit at the Pioneers Museum** featuring works by contemporary and historical female artists from around the Pikes Peak region.

They're also on display in the new exhibit at **Gallery 1261 in Denver, "Badass Women of the West,"** featuring women who are shaping contemporary realism in the Western U.S. The show is up through Dec. 28.

"Time Traveler," one of three pieces that won first place in the 2022 Recycle Santa Fe juried art exhibit, was inspired by an old copper tea kettle that screamed spaceship to the artist. The time traveler, an older bald man wearing a top hat and manning the spaceship, is a vintage pepper shaker. The ship's glass dome is an old watch dome and sports copper tubing Bracewell hand-coiled. Completing the piece are O rings from old cafe curtains, vintage cheese graters she soldered, a compass, a real glass tail light and old furniture brass detailing. Oh, and the traveler has a tiny, scruffy dog figurine perched on one shoulder because she didn't want her traveler going it alone.



"She's on Fire" is the piece she'd hoped to enter in this year's Recycle exhibit until a big snowstorm put the kibosh on her trip to Santa Fe. The sculpture, featured under "Goddesses" on her online site at www.michellebracewell.art, is concocted from a 1960 Campbell's Soup rubber girl doll she transformed and placed atop a brass lamp base, a vintage tobacco tin and an antique brass welder's torch.

"I covered her in epoxy clay and gave her boobies, belly and a butt," Bracewell said, "because now she's a post-menopausal queen and she's on fire, baby."

So which comes first — the idea or the junk?

Both. Sometimes she buys something and knows exactly what to do with it. Other times, she has the idea and goes out in search of the pieces she needs to bring it to fruition. But always, there is the story behind the work that singles out her assemblage art.

"The story either comes first and I bring it to life or the story evolves in front of my eyes," she said. "All of a sudden it comes together and that's it, you're done. It's almost like they (the piece) did it. It's kind of weird. It fuels itself."

For one of her newest pieces, "High Five & Hellfire," which plays with the ideas of heaven and hell, she used a vintage 1970s clock box, a thrift store box for hell, a vintage latex glove mold, the top of a jewelry box, a rosary, vintage doll hands and a tiny antique angel.

"But it's not just about heaven and hell," she said. "There are two sides to all of us. We can reach for the positive or not."

Over at **Platte Collections Art Gallery**, a large exhibit hall in the basement of Platte Furniture, where Bracewell's the spotlight artist through January, her works are "the talk of the gallery," said **gallery coordinator Elias King**.

"I tell her nobody is making work like you're making," King said.

Chat with Bracewell for even a few minutes and it's easy to see what a lift she gets from her work and all the ideas spinning through her brain.

"Sitting in my studio, going to junk shops, estate sales — I get this thrill, this rush of adrenaline," she said. "Ideas just start coming. Friends always want to go junking with me, and I prefer they don't because they'll come up to me saying what do you think about this and I'll say stop, you're messing with my whole flow. It has to come to me."

Bracewell's lifelong love for old stuff makes her suspect she was born in the wrong decade — the music and style of the 1920s through the '40s are more her vibe. When



she was 15 and living in Houston, she lied about her age so she could work a concession stand at the city's biggest flea market.

"I'd take my paycheck and spend it at antique booths," she said. "I still have the first thing I ever bought — one of the first boxes of aspirin in the late 1800s. It has real aspirin in it."

But she didn't see art in her junk until a dozen years ago. As a burned-out web designer, she retreated to her studio to figure out something to do with all of her found treasures. She made her first piece for her mom, then some for her sisters, then her best friend. They were received so well that she kept going, making a couple of pieces a year while working full time. Now, as she transitions to full-time artistry, she builds 30 to 35 works every year.

Due to the popularity of her pieces, she'll likely become a permanent fixture at Platte Collections.

"People gravitate toward them and want to talk about them and touch them," King said. "She has a great use of nostalgia. There's a touch of something you might have owned or played with when you were a child or seen that has that intrigue. She's making art for the play and joy of it. She has these ideas in her head she has to get out. Rather than trying to find what would appeal to a mass customer base, she's not worrying about that, but creating for what materials she has and what vision she has."