

Debra Fritts - *Beekeeper*

## Conversation with Artist Debra Fritts

Kathy Brown

**S**toryteller Debra Fritts walks me through her studio, speaking in soft southern tones and the language of terracotta clay. The stories she tells are personal ones, though variations on universal themes, faith, completeness, connection between the earthbound and the divine, between parents and children, between surface and core.

As she speaks the stories leap to life in the forms of her sculpted figures. But the building of them, she tells me, is a slow process requiring both inspiration and often extended contemplation.

She pauses in front of a recently completed sculpture called *The Beekeeper*, a female figure with arms raised and hands resting

gently on her head, standing atop an antique metal beehive. She indicates the base and tells me she found it in an antique store in Tennessee. "I loved the look of the rusty metal and the fact that it's been so used and that little opening where the bees come in. That was so intriguing to me."

It sat in her studio for a year before she decided to use it as a pedestal for a figure. She took it to the blacksmith then, so that the pole now hidden within *The Beekeeper* like a metal spine could be welded onto the top of the hive for support. At that point, she still didn't know the nature of the figure that would finally find form on this rustic base.

"I brought it home and started looking at it and all of the sudden I thought of the beekeepers who had tended this hive. Not knowing anything about bees but knowing that my name, Debra, means bee, I felt like there was some reason I needed to do this piece. I built her without having any preconceived ideas about what the body was going to be doing. Then I thought of her putting her hands on top of her head."

From there, Fritts added a cascade of wires that shower down around the beekeeper's face, suggestive of a mask that might be worn to protect from stings. But such a permeable guard would offer little real protection.

"She's not afraid," Fritts explains. "The bees can get in and out. I don't know why I wanted that transparency. I liked pulling the metal up to the top of her head, to balance the metal at the base. And I like the idea of her hands on her head. She's in a position where anything can come after her, anything can come, and there's no fear. She's just there."

A student who saw the sculpture told Fritts to read *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd and she has begun doing that. She says the story may influence her art. She has a piece in process in her studio now, a sculpture of a little girl with a glass jar in her hands.

"I was thinking about my childhood and remembering catching lightning bugs and putting them in a jar but always letting them go. It was such a thrill and I wanted to do a piece that took me back to that. But instead of putting lightning bugs in the jar I thought I would put little cardinals, because that's a symbol for my mother. Now I'm reading this book about a girl who can see the bees come into her room at night and she catches them and puts them in a jar and that image may influence the piece. Maybe there will still be cardinals in the jar, rather than lightning bugs or bees, but there will be some kind of change. I don't know what; I'm not that far yet."

Cardinals, as symbols for her mother, frequently make their appearance in Fritts' work and in her life. "I did a whole series and I'm still working a lot with the cardinal because my mother is so important in my life. My mother's parents died when she was two, first her mother of pneumonia, then her father six months later. There were five girls and one boy in the family. When her father got sick he put the children in an orphanage.

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**Debra Fritts** is a ceramic artist and the Director of the Clay Program at the Roswell Visual Arts Center. Her work can be seen at Lowe Gallery in Atlanta and at Blue Spiral in Asheville, NC.

He said, ‘Never separate the girls.’ So who’s going to adopt five girls? That’s not going to happen.”

But it did happen. The oldest sister, age fourteen at the time of her parents’ deaths, married within a year or two and adopted the next oldest, who was later able to adopt the next. Then the next came to join them, and the next.

“They all ended up adopting each other, my mother being the last one to get out,” says Fritts. “She was sixteen before she could leave the orphanage and join her sisters, but finally they all lived together. And they stayed together. They were very close.”

From the time the girls entered the orphanage, the oldest sister told them that any time they saw a red bird, it was their parents watching over them. When Fritts was a child, her mother would say, “Your good luck symbol is the cardinal. When you see one, make a wish.”

The words have stayed with Fritts. “It’s automatic,” she tells me. “I’ll make a wish every time I see a cardinal. I hope my two children are doing it too, because they know that the red bird is a very special bird to our family.”

The wishes she makes are for such intangibles as good health and safety for her children. “I don’t ever wish for material things. My mother never had much and that was not the point of making the wishes. We use the cardinal’s luck to wish for the things that really matter.”

When her mother died four years ago, Fritts began working through her grief in clay. One of the pieces that emerged in that process is called *Unstitched*. It is of a woman in a home-sewn skirt that is separating at the seam. In one hand she holds some of the red threads that were used to stitch the skirt together. Her other hand is transforming into a cardinal.

“My mother had to sew all of her clothes because she didn’t have much money,” Fritts explains. “I didn’t intend for the skirt to come apart on the side but it did and I didn’t want to mend it. The clay was at the stage where I could have but I decided to leave it like that. And I made her looking up into the heavens because I know that’s where she is.”

Looking up is another recurring theme in Fritts’ work. She shows me a sculpture of two heads, thrown back at the tops of their elongated necks, eyes gazing up into the heavens.

Their surface is Fritts’ characteristic roughened matte finish. “There’s nothing polished about me,” she jokes. She achieves



The Wait

Debra Fritts - detail of *Beekeeper*

the texture by pressing objects into the clay while she is building and also through her glazes.

The heads are perched on a board that is balanced like a seesaw on top of a wheel. “I use the wheel a lot in my work. For me the wheel is a symbol for moving on, for leaving what you have for something else.”

The long necks on the *See-Saw* figures emphasize the intensity of the eyes’ skyward stares, indicating a deep yearning for divine connection. Fritts tells me that as she has grown older and endured difficult experiences, her ability to “look up” has been a great source of strength for her.

The wheel is not the only circle in her work. She shows me her latest piece, a female form reminiscent of *The Beekeeper*, standing on a clay beehive that Fritts fashioned herself. She chose that base because of her affinity for the circle, a shape she loves to incorporate into her fashionings of the human form.

The surface of the piece, which mimics the layers of encrustation found on shipwrecked forms, is a new one for Fritts. “I love my work the best when I have the wet clay and I’m working intuitively and I don’t get caught up in the details. On this piece I told myself not to get involved in the details, in the eyes and nose and mouth, just to show the human form. But before I knew it, I was in there doing the eyes and nose and mouth. Since I couldn’t allow myself to build without the details, I decided to let them disappear in slip, which is the clay and water mixture. So after the piece started drying I took really thick slip and started painting over and painting over and painting over until I had about four or five layers. That enabled a little bit of the disappearance of the details. You can still see them but not as strongly. I don’t know where I’m going to go with this idea but it’s something I’m interested in. I’m really drawn to simplicity. In this piece, the surface got complicated but the form is simple.”

And there is an elegant simplicity in the figure’s rounded beehive base. Fritts wanted the figure to stand on a circular form because she sees the circle as a symbol for completeness, particularly the completeness she feels in her relationship with her partner, artist Frank Shelton.

“I feel very fortunate,” she says. “It’s so nice to be in a good relationship and the circle is symbolic of that. The circle is also a symbol for strength. I can’t help but relate it to our life source, to the sun and the moon. Frank and I are fascinated by the moon. That’s why the bed looks out the window, so in the evenings we can see the moon. It’s very important to us. The circle is eternity.”

So why do so many of her sculptures depict the solitary female form?

“The female figures are self portraits. Even though they don’t look like me, they’re about me. Even though Frank is my soul mate, I have to stand on my own. I am determined that I have to keep my life even though he’s such an important part. I’ve learned I have to protect myself. I have to stay strong. I notice that so much of my work says, you share but you don’t share everything, you give but you don’t give everything. As I get older I get a lot stronger. I feel like that is what this piece is about. Even though she’s small,” she says, indicating the newest, as yet untitled, piece, “She’s strong.”

As such, she is a suitable self-portrait of Fritts, small in stature, large in an inner strength easily felt through her art, large in her willingness to innovate and to lend herself as a channel for the creative force behind her work. She points out a sheet of paper taped to the wall in her studio, and reads from it the words of John Cage.

When you start working, everybody is in your studio, the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas. But as you continue they start leaving one by one and you’re left completely alone. And if you’re lucky, even you leave.

Fritts smiles in acknowledgment of the truth of these words. “I read this to my students,” she says. “I tell them, if you can get to this place, magic will happen.” ■



Debra Fritts - *The Quiet One*