

Art feature: Sculpting without sight: Woman creates with clay

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CHICO -- Sherri Fizer has a passion for making ceramics, but her favorite projects are her "praying people."

She rolls the clay between her hands into long strands, pinching it off to make the bodies for the 5-inch kneeling people. A ball of clay gets put at one end of the strip for the head and another strip gets wrapped around for the arms.

She doesn't paint them because color wouldn't mean anything to her. Fizer hasn't been able to see colors or much else for more than 20 years.

"I like the creating part of it," Fizer said of her ceramic work. "I don't care what color it is. It's the construction and form of the piece that interests me."

Fizer was born with glaucoma, which worsened as she got older. Her left eye hemorrhaged when she was eight years old and her right eye continued deteriorating. Now she can only sense light perception.

Clay became a way for her to "get out and do things" as her vision decreased, she said. She started taking classes at Berkeley City College, then called Vista College, where she took ceramic classes and was later asked to be a class assistant.

Her favorite way to mold clay is with the coil method. Similar to how she makes the praying figures, she rolls the clay into round strips and rolls the strip into coils. This method creates inconsistent swirls on the outside of a pot or vase. She then smooths the inside with her hands. The coil method can be time consuming, depending on the width of strips, and she's never sure how a project will turn out.

"Coil work comes as it comes," she said.

After finishing college she moved to Chico in 1992. She continues to take classes, learning new ways to work with clay. She plans to take courses at Chico State University next, even though she won't keep much of the work she'll make.

"I get such a joy from giving them away," she said.

Much of what Fizer makes is non-functional art, such as ceramic pies, animal figures and masks. It may seem superfluous to some, but not to Fizer.

"To me, it's not a hobby," she said. "It's a passion and part of expressing who I am."

Fizer can't see what she's making but she can feel how it looks while she crafts a project's shape. Fizer counts herself lucky that she once had better vision or molding clay would be much harder.

"I go a lot by my memory of things," she said.

Being mostly blind can sometimes make her craft difficult, especially when she glazes or paints, but it's not an overwhelming obstacle.

"We all have our limits," Fizer said. "It doesn't matter if you're in a wheelchair, have arthritis or have a toothache."

Even with blindness, she has learned many ceramic techniques but her favorite project is still her praying people. She gives them out at prayer meetings to remind herself and others the importance of prayer and loving others.

"It's my form of helping others because I'm so blessed," she said. "It's giving a little of myself."

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