

# THE MAGIC OF DRAGONFLY KNOLL GALLERY

By David Morrison

Set in the heart of their twenty-five acre pocket of tranquil Denman Island woodland, the home of artists John Tallerino and Marc Randall makes for an impressive sight when looming from out of the trees at the end of their lengthy driveway. A simultaneously imposing and welcoming edifice, the house boasts a tangible ambience of Eastern mysticism as a pleasing consequence of the decorative embellishments Tallerino has placed on and around it.

Since relocating to the island from Oregon in 2005, this couple of thirty-four years has worked tirelessly to create not only the perfect environment in which to live and work in peaceful seclusion, but also an enchanting destination for visitors. Typifying their desire to offer a spiritually enriching haven is the meandering trail built in the surrounding woods. The way is intermittently punctuated by more lovely examples of Tallerino's work, which is rich in Buddhist and Zen themes and symbolism, but it is clear that the artist sites them strictly where they will enhance a natural feature, or vice versa. It also seems that the trail builders have allowed the forest to guide the



way, so the human interference in creating it is barely noticeable.

The principal attraction, however, is the small, yet ornately decorated Dragonfly Knoll Gallery, where Tallerino's stunning shrines and Rhode Island-born Randall's exquisitely crafted handmade books, or "Bookmarcs," are on display and sale. It was this aspect of their talents I was briefly introduced to by friends last year, arousing interest enough that I felt compelled to investigate further. I couldn't help but wonder, for example, how on earth one would get into making shrines.

In respect of Tallerino's professional background, it was not so much of a leap as I had imagined.

In the sixties he studied at the late Lester Polakov's prestige Studio and Forum of Stage Design in Greenwich Village, New York City, which lead to



extensive experience in theatre design. Hitch this to his natural artistic flair and deep spirituality and the bridge to his latter-day creations is easy to cross. But it all started when Tallerino and Randall were running a B&B called Middle Creek Run in Sheridan, OR, and he got a creative itch he didn't immediately know how to scratch.

"I was at a place in my life where I wanted to get involved with art," he recalls. "I started working on different things, including toys, but I couldn't find anything that really stuck with me. Then we went to the local college because they had some Buddhist monks coming in to do a mandala. We were both interested in seeing how that was done and watched them make this incredible mandala over a two-week period. It was so inspiring to watch, and so mystical and spiritual. I thought I could do that, came home and built my first shrine! It has become a way for me to express myself and to do something that is healing for the planet."

Tallerino's shrines are magnificent. Some are simple and direct while others are of highly intricate design, but they are all alive with dazzling primary colours and calming earth tones. Symbolizing both life

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force and fire in Buddhism, red is featured heavily, as are greens in representation of balance and harmony. Tallerino is also fond of utilizing found objects in his work, like animal bones, driftwood and seashells, all of which understandably serve to enhance the expressions of the artist's oneness with nature that lie at the core of his pieces.

As for Randall's Bookmarks, he, too, started creating them by chance, just seven years ago. An old friend of Tallerino's made books in her downtown McMinnville, OR, studio and one day showed Randall how to do it. "Forty-five minutes later she came to me and said, 'He's a natural!'" laughs Tallerino. "He took a couple of courses with her and has been making books ever since."

"I'd never done anything like that before," reveals the quietly spoken Randall, a former dental ceramicist. "I always had an artistic spirit but never had a way to express it. Because of circumstances I just worked, doing whatever I could do, but was fortunate enough to get into a dental laboratory when I was about twenty. I was good with my hands, enjoying close work, and went about as far as I could in that, unless I wanted to open my own lab. But I don't like to run things, I like to make things."

The uncannily perfect compliment to his partner's shrines, Randall's Bookmarks are truly beautiful. Like Tallerino, he will

run with the ball on a design if he feels so inclined, resulting in some daedal ornamental books, but others are delightful in their simplicity. The painstaking process involved in the Bookmarks' binding and stitching is plain for all to see, evidence of the patience required in such a craft. The jackets are made from anything from leather to wood, and the designs evoke images of everything from the Oriental to the Medieval.

Randall puts a lot of forethought into the designs of his books, yet frequently works on several at once. "Depending on the books I'm making, because of the process of bookbinding having so many steps, I like to work on three or four of the same binding at the same time. Or I'll work on a special book that doesn't fit any of the rules, but I would work on that book alone. And I assemble them in my head before bringing any materials together; the ideas tend to gestate for a long time."

The long hours these artists put into their work comes as no surprise when learning more about their aforementioned B&B, where their clientele would include visitors to the wineries of the lush Willamette Valley.

Purchasing a badly deteriorated, twenty-one room house on 97 acres of Oregon farmland in 1989, they went on to spend the better part of a decade restoring and renovating

the property. The result was so astonishing that it earned the cover story and an eight-page full colour spread in the June 2000 issue of *Victorian Homes* magazine. In short, these guys are not averse to hard work, so every bead of sweat that goes into their art is reflected in its invention and high quality.

Tallerino and Randall are a true partnership in every way, therefore deeply supportive and proud of each other's artistic achievements. Of how it all comes together in the scheme of their life, Randall says: "John's work takes the form of a prayer, and when it's done it's magical. When I work on my books I'm creating a spell; I'm putting...I can't think of a word to use other than *magic*...into the book. When the book sells and somebody writes into it, that completes the magic, and that's how I think our work meshes together so well. It's a meditative, prayerful, *magical* process. I think we do it more for our own spiritual growth than for any other reason, but if people see our work and resonate with it, that's great." ~

*Usually open daily, Dragonfly Knoll Gallery is situated at 4920-B Lacon Road, and will be part of Denman Island's 19th Home and Garden Tour on May 7 and 8. Call (250) 335-1551 or email denmanisland.hgt@gmail.com to reserve tickets for this event.*

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