

Away We Go

She brought another chiropractor into family.

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NORTHWEST ARKANSAS PROFILES

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Patricia Louise Tapscott Musick Speaking in stone

“Over the years, I’ve learned that, no matter how adverse the situation, I could learn and grow from it.”



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JASON IVESTER

BENTONVILLE — It takes a brave woman to stand up a piece of rough, ridged stone and call it art. Pat Musick is the first to admit it.

“It takes a lot of stubbornness, I think,” she says. “I still have a lot of questions I deal with. When you’re creating abstract art, you’re dealing with a vocabulary not everyone can relate to. There are people who’ve been friends for years who still don’t understand what I do.”

The Vermont artist — praised by *New York Times* art critics and collectors near and far — has developed a strong spine since her first major museum show 42 years ago. And she’s at ease provoking questions as well as answering them.

Sprawling saplings and weeds spring up around her latest work — 34 native Arkansas sandstone pillars of varying heights, arranged in a serpentine circuit to mimic the forced migration of American Indians on the

EVIE BLAD
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Trail of Tears.

The piece, called *A Place Where They Cried*, challenges the viewer as much as it challenges the elements. The surface of the stones, which are anchored 8 inches in the dense clay soil, is free of overworked chiseled motifs. Rather, natural nubs and inversions on the hard surface form facial features and personal characteristics as the row crosses a small, trailside stream.

The work, commissioned for the Walton family’s Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, under construction in Bentonville, is a homecoming of sorts for Musick.

Born in California, the artist completed her transformation from painter to sculptor at a studio on 109 acres in rural Madison County. The landscape of Arkansas inspired her work, which deals with themes of man’s

interaction with nature, she says.

Gazing daily over the Kings River Valley was about “finding myself in the history of art, but also in the history of mankind.” The Natural State’s ability to make Musick feel small and insignificant continues to inspire her work, although she has moved across the country, trading a sprawling home and workshop for a modest condo.

Though her blue eyes are responsive and warm and her countenance is softened by age, the 83-year-old’s fearless approach to life is evident in her own retelling of it.

She entered the art world despite her family’s insistence that it was impractical and attended graduate school at a time when few women did. She survived the death of a husband and continues to produce challenging art into the autumn of her life.

“I am so fortunate to be able to do what I do,” she says.

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SELF PORTRAIT

Date and place of birth: Sept. 14, 1926, Los Angeles

The best way to wake up in the morning is to have Jerry touch me gently, very gently.

If I could have dinner with three people, living or dead, I’d choose Jerry; Lou Bink Noll, a professor friend; and Italian Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca, an early influence of mine.

My favorite thing about my husband is how kind and good he is. He puts up with me.

The three essentials I’d require on a desert island are a blank sketchbook, a hunk of charcoal, Jerry, wine, cheese and a loaf of bread. That’s more than three, isn’t it?

The thing tourists never see in Italy that they really should

is a series of frescoes by Francesca in Arezzo. He does, I think, the most beautiful faces. The eyes are so great and calm.

One concept every mother should teach her child is to respect the individuality of others.

One phrase to sum me up: To thine own self be true.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JASON IVESTER

Pat Musick explains features of her sculpture, *A Place Where They Cried*, to her husband, Jerry Carr (from left); David Burghart, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art grounds and facilities director; Buddy Philpot, Walton Family Foundation director; Don Bacigalupi, Crystal Bridges director; and philanthropist Pat Walker (in golf cart) after installing it on the grounds of Crystal Bridges in Bentonville.

"I still have a lot of questions I deal with. When you're creating abstract art, you're dealing with a vocabulary not everyone can relate to. There are people who've been friends for years who still don't understand what I do."

The elementary teacher was wrong about her

• MUSICK, continued from 1D WOVEN INTEREST

Musick became enamored of the visual arts as a child, watching a Navajo woman weave belts in her backyard.

The woman, taking care of Musick's mother following a surgery, worked on a homemade loom, roughly fashioned from a sheet of plywood with notches to keep the string from sliding as she slowly formed colorful, geometric patterns.

"I was just fascinated by this," Musick says. "I just had this feeling that I don't think I really understood until later that I wanted to make something beautiful with my hands."

No one would have guessed that the daughter of an insurance salesman and a stay-at-home mom would one day be a successful artist. A fifth-grade teacher's comments on Musick's report card scarred her developing aspirations and solidified her desire to fulfill them.

"You need to discourage Pat from making art because she's never going to succeed," the teacher wrote.

"I got mad and determined, and thought, 'I'll show that woman,'" Musick says.

As high school yearbook editor, she sketched out the mascot for the Santa Ana Saints, still in use today — a fact her husband, fellow alumnus Jerry Carr, retells as proudly as any of her successful reviews from major art critics.

When it came time for the then 17-year-old to attend college, her practical-minded father offered to pay for four years of tuition at the University of California at Los Angeles.

A stubborn Musick opted instead for two years in the art program at the University of Southern California — the most that her equally stubborn father was willing

to pay for.

Married to former USC lineman football coach Jack Musick, she rounded out her education auditing night classes in drawing and painting while he spent the late 1950s coaching at Dartmouth College, which didn't admit women at the time.

"I probably had the equivalent of a degree by the time I'd finished," she says.

When an art teacher encouraged her to "go out on her own," she held a small gallery show. The college's president bought her first painting.

When Jack took a job at Cornell University, Pat quickly tallied up the course work she needed to finish an art history degree.

It was 1968, social unrest plagued the campus, and the couple were busy rearing three girls, two of whom were in college.

When Musick learned administrators were allowing black students with unfinished bachelor's degrees to earn master's degrees, she petitioned for the same treatment.

"They told me, 'Why don't you go play golf like the rest of the coaches' wives?'"

She persisted, earning a master's degree in educational psychology and, later, a doctorate in art history.

When Jack became ill with cancer, Pat moved the family to Texas, taking a job developing an art therapy program at the University of Houston.

He died a year later. The two had been married for 31 years and had three daughters together: Cathleen, Melinda and Laura.

"Over the years, I've learned that, no matter how adverse the situation, I could learn and grow from it," she says.

Musick and Carr went to the same high school in Southern California and spent childhood evenings watching

television around the same set with their large families, but they never really interacted until a "Presbyterian yenta" set them up in Houston.

Carr, an astronaut, designed equipment for NASA.

Musick met the man with a strong frame and a quick smile over dinner.

"After losing my husband, I felt a need for a very strong person, and I sensed that in him," she says.

Carr, with six children of his own, admits to making a beeline for his future wife at church coffee hours, eager to chat.

"We had so much fun talking about the good old days," he says. "And she's so warm and personable."

OPEN TO INTERPRETATION

Musick and Carr took a crew of stone workers out for dinner at Las Palmas Mexican Restaurant after the men spent several days moving heavy stone pillars "just an inch" to perfect the installation of the Crystal Bridges sculpture.

Carr is as much a part of Musick's art as the substances she uses to render it. He serves as a gentle alternative to an alarm clock on the road (a typical artist, Musick doesn't respond well to mornings). He's also very much a part of the creative process, finding ways to practically construct Musick's visions.

The artist jokes that she dreams up big ideas and "Jerry has to worry about how much it's gonna weigh."

After Carr retired from NASA, the two moved to a plot of land outside Huntsville they'd bought with fellow astronaut Bill Pogue.

Carr built a house and a large work space on the 109-acre plot, which previously served host to family camping trips.

The land stirred something in Musick, she says.

She began talking walks every morning with her dog, saying "hello world" as she stared into the ancient valley on their property.

Ever an atypical couple, the two had their first argument not about hot-button topics like politics or religion, but about the nature of creativity.

Carr, who'd spent 84 days in space on the Skylab 4 space station mission, insisted he was not a creative person.

"She wouldn't have it," he says. "She said, 'The space station is one of man's most creative endeavors!'"

"My thesis is that mankind has an innate capacity for creativity, that without it, we wouldn't have survived as a species," Musick said. "That applies to every single life event, from creating a marriage to driving a taxicab."

Carr has a perspective few people can share. He'd seen the earth from space, floating in a sea of black like a pearl in the ocean. He understands the core of Musick's work — how tiny and fragile we all are, how tiny and fragile the planet is.

"I admire that quality of her work, the way she brings manmade materials and nature into harmony," he says. "People ask her what it means, and, totally nonplussed, she'll say, 'Whatever you want it to mean.'"

Musick displayed her work at the Arkansas Arts Center, building a following in the state.

While in Arkansas, she put down her paintbrush and started creating full sculptures. She toured a Trail of Tears-inspired sculpture, stones suspended from wooden supports, along the migratory path's original route, fixing the art in on the banks of streams and through forests along the way.

The piece, now in the per-

manent collection at Tyson Foods Inc., formed the basis for the Crystal Bridges sculpture.

Crystal Bridges Director Don Bacigalupi, then a young curator in San Antonio, traveled to Musick's studio to meet with her in the 1990s.

"Within each of Pat Musick's refined constructions, the viewer finds the artist using all the tools at her disposal to create a sublime recipe — culture and nature; man and the earth, forever and inextricably linked — for extraordinary beauty," Bacigalupi wrote in a collection of essays about Musick's work.

"That put me through a doorway," Musick says of Bacigalupi's visit and the subsequent exposure.

LIFE ON HER TERMS

Musick and Carr traveled to a special Earth Day gathering of the United Nations General Assembly in 1990 along with 40 other astronauts and cosmonauts and their families.

Six space travelers from the United States, France, Russia, Germany, Saudi Arabia and Spain took the podium to tell how seeing the world from space had changed how they viewed it. Speaking in different languages without the aid of interpreters, the speakers had no way of understanding each other.

Listening to translations through a set of headphones, Musick was awed that each participant recounted the same thing in a different language: The Earth contains a fragile beauty, its atmosphere possessing the relative vulnerability of an apple peel, waiting to be pierced by a poor decision.

"They all said the same thing," using words like fragile, protect, sustain and nature, she recounts. "It was so beautiful."

The experience inspired

Musick's current work, a collection of pieces called *Our Fragile Home*.

Pieces in the collection include bird's eggs carved from alabaster, beeswax and wood suspended on paper and Musick's original poetry.

Musick and Carr worked to assemble the art from their new home in Vermont. They moved there four years ago to be closer to their grandchildren. As the couple aged, they decided they'd rather focus their energy on art than maintaining their land.

"That's the kind of move you want to make on your own terms," she says.

Life has slowed since the move, but it hasn't stopped.

Pat considers her kitchen the best source of Mexican food in Vermont. She periodically orders four bucks' worth of tortillas from her favorite Mexican bakery in Springdale, paying \$35 in overnight FedEx shipping fees, an effort she says is totally worth it.

The two enjoy traveling to Italy — as much for the wine as for the art. After hearing about Sassicaia, a fine Tuscan red, the couple planned to have their first taste in its native environs.

They spoiled their plans when they spied the coveted drink on the menu of a favorite Italian restaurant statewide, where they'd stopped to have a quick meal of pasta.

"We were sharing a \$10 plate of spaghetti and a \$100 bottle of wine," Musick laughs.

The artist clearly enjoys her life, and she's not planning to trade her hard-won method of expression for an easier path any time soon.

Musick plans to keep making art, to keep asking questions, and to keep looking people straight in the eye when they ask her "what does that mean?"