

KALEIDOSCOPE EYES

the bead artist's vision

By Julia Dawabare

Picture yourself in a garden like Monet's Giverny, the sun-drenched, sparkling colors sending you into a trance. You feel warm, light, and content: a perfect moment. I've often wondered if artists exist in this saturated state, cocooned in their own dream world.

Commonly unearthed in ancient graves, beads of shell, seeds, stones, and wood were probably the first ornaments that humans possessed. Through the centuries they have reflected not only the artistry of a culture but its spirituality and social stratification. In our times, beadwork can be a meditation, a form of therapy, and a passion.

The 1950s and 1960s saw a resurgence of interest in crafts, especially beading, for a variety of reasons. Scouting programs introduced the beading culture of Native Americans to thousands of children. Rich cultures and handicrafts profoundly influenced Peace Corps volunteers. When the Beatles reinvented themselves in 1967 with a visit to the Maharishi, Eastern religious thought and "love beads" became immediately

Cynthia Cox, *Bear Berry Patch* (back), 4" x 2 3/4" x 1", 1995.

fashionable. And the civil rights movement inspired many African Americans to explore their roots, revisiting traditional African dress, including trade beads and tribal beadwork.

This idealistic generation of young people emulated those aspects of Native American, African, and Indian cultures in pursuit of a spiritually balanced life.

Rather than using the bland, mass-produced products of an industrial society, they chose to handcraft everything from clothing to dishes and dwellings. During the 1980s several artists were creating astounding work with glass seed beads, but museums and galleries weren't taking contemporary beadwork seriously. Fortunately, this changed.

Born in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky, Linda Fifield grew up crocheting, embroidering, quilting, and hooking rugs with her mother and grandmother. An exhibition of



Collis Marshall, *Mr. Punch*, glass beads, plasticene clay, velvet, pearls, phototransfer fabric, 1994. (From the collection of Sallie Bingham.)

smile on its polymer clay face, addresses, on a deeper level, issues of domestic violence. This is not a surprise. Marshall, who has a master's degree in art therapy, brought art into the women's prison at Pee Wee Valley State Prison for the first time in 20 years, and she sits with Alzheimer's patients, who find the color and rhythm of her beading relaxing.

A former student of Marshall's, Cynthia Cox, has blossomed into an amazing bead artist in her own right. True to form, she has been "crafty" all her life, but winning a bid for a box of Venetian beads at a flea market cemented her ongoing love for painting with the color and texture of a bead palette.

Cox specializes in amulet bags. The scale of her work is arresting. Even more astonishing is the first bag that she ever wove. In the space of approximately three square inches she tells a story complete with mountains, bears, a berry patch, trees, a waterfall, and a little cabin. I asked her what inspired this piece. "It's my dream world," she said.

Native American handcrafts, which *have* been a part of museum collections, at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History sparked Fifield's passion for beadwork. She prefers vivid colors and simple composition for the vessels that she turns herself and that she clothes in beaded splendor. Her *Earth & Fire* series features a freeform design (not pre-planned on bead graph paper) that builds upon itself as she beads around and around the vessel. "It's exciting because you never know exactly where the next bead will lead you."

Surrounded by snow-covered woods and overlooking a frozen pond, Fifield's work space is sparse and tranquil. There is no TV, no phone; she requires stillness to create. This peaceful existence, she feels, is a blessing that feeds her spirit. The aforementioned series and its sister series, *Heaven & Earth*, were inspired by the verdant trees, azure skies, and crimson fire. She feels abundantly lucky to have been cradled in the hills of Kentucky all of her life.

Collis Marshall's foray into beading was inspired by an entirely different landscape. She lived in Colorado for 20 years, where she was exposed to the beadwork of the Native Americans prevalent in the Southwest. Upon her return to her native Louisville, a bout of homesickness for the West prompted the yard sale purchase of a shoebox full of beads.

She took her beads home and began to experiment. By using contemporary technology to plot particularly complicated designs, her work has evolved into iconoclastic marvels with a "dark whimsy." Some pieces are highly personal, dealing with the loss of loved ones or the joy of her pets; others are socially relevant. *Mr. Punch*, a deceptively appealing figure with a colorful beaded velvet hat and a cheery



Linda Fifield, *Fire Lizards*, 5" x 3", 1999.



Linda Fifield. One bead at a time.