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Start Stratford Arts & Culture Magazine provides an inside view of the vibrant and diverse arts community in and around Stratford, Ontario, Canada. We aim to spotlight the creative and talented people who call the Stratford area home.

In this issue: **Scratching at the Window** artist Karen Waschinski

article by Maureen Argon, photos by Ann Baggley



I wonder now whether it was coincidence, synchronicity or the mystery of an unseen world existing just outside our reach that caused two seemingly separate events to occur in a matter of a few hours.

On this particular morning, my 9-year-old daughter and I walked to her school bus stop, chatting about the note left under her pillow by her special tooth fairy, "Belinda" in exchange for a tooth. Later that same morning I



found myself in the home of soft sculpture artist Karen Waschinski, mesmerized by the fantastical creatures she creates and our conversation about the power of fairies, goblins and other mythical beings that are so ingrained in our culture, folk tales, and cultures.

If you visit the Stratford Public Library at all, you have probably met Karen, one of the librarians there. With her particular interest in the magical realm, Karen's is, perhaps, the perfect day job – a world of books and imagination. Yet Karen has taken her own imagination to a place where few people go – giving form to creatures of folklore, fairy tales and fantasy, as well as those of her own imagining, through the figures she creates in her spare time.

Karen's interest in soft sculpture began with her childhood collection of **Steiff plush toys**. Originally from Germany, these toys, most commonly bears, are jointed so the arms, legs and head can move.

I had a few of them myself – a bear, a rabbit and a small German

Shepherd. And I have them still.



Wanting more of them and able to sew, Karen began to make the animals she didn't have. At first she used kits of bears and bunnies to learn the basics of construction – nothing short of complicated engineering to the unpracticed eye –but it wasn't long before she began designing her own animals and creatures.

"I'm self-taught," Karen shares. "It's been trial and error. A lot of the skill that goes into constructing a bear, for example, is kept secret."



The process of designing a new critter begins with an idea, gathering and assembling trim, feathers, beads, and fabric, a line drawing, pattern making, and the pleasant but intricate and time consuming labour that goes into each sculpture.

Karen mentions the 1981 stop motion film of the Pied Piper of Hamelin and the design and illustration work of **Brian Froud**, who collaborated with Jim Henson on such film projects as *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*, as tremendous influences on some of her designs.

A limb with a joint at the hip or knee so that it can move to create a pose begins with a skeleton of looping wires, cotter pins and discs. The skeleton is then padded so you can't feel it from the outside. The outer fabric, (German mohair, French velour, African matte) is cut and sewn together over the wire structure with invisible stitches and of course,

stuffed.

The eyes and nose are attached or embroidered onto the fabric and further details may be hand painted on with delicate strokes. Depending on the animal or creature, there may be miniscule claws and teeth crafted with Fimo and sewn securely into the fabric so they can't drop off.

Each creation has a discreetly tucked away signature and frequently an embroidered tattoo. It's painstaking work requiring a steady hand, tremendous skill and many, many long hours.

A rat, among Karen's favourites, and one of the more complex pieces in terms of construction, can take 30 hours to complete.

"It's almost like a guilty pleasure," admits Karen.

And somewhere along the way they begin to come to life and have a life of their own. A goblin sitting in a dark corner of her studio is credited for misplacing objects around the house.

Karen's creations include, bats, hedgehogs, dragons and woosels (a cross between a ferret and weasel), bratbies (rats in haute couture barbie gowns), cats dressed in Goth and Steampunk outfits, dominatrix vixens and catfish mermaids.

"The wackier the design, the faster the collectors snap them up," laughs Karen.

But after spending so much time with them are they difficult for Karen to part with I wondered? "Yes!" Karen answers without hesitation.

"Some will never go."

To see Karen's complete collection, and read about the life of some of her creations, visit her website www.scratchingatthewindow.com.

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