

Gail Roberts:

# Nature, Joy and Purpose

by Lorraine A. DarConte



*The Tree of Life*, in Brandi Fenton Memorial Park, by Gail Roberts, handmade clay tile mural, 16' x 19', 2006

During her long career, artist Gail Roberts has worked as a professional studio potter, painter, teacher, director of an art studio and a public artist. Today, she both paints and creates one-of-a-kind, three-dimensional, handmade tile art for a variety of venues and clients.

Her work adorns fireplaces and pools and benches and doorways, among other things. In addition, she's been commissioned to create numerous works for public spaces, including parks and schools. Whether it's adding color poolside or creating an entire outdoor environment, Roberts and her team design for a specific site.

Roberts custom-creates whatever "image" a client is looking for. She goes to the client's home or business, gets a sense of the client's space and who he/she is, then provides pencil-and-paper sketches based on what she's experiencing. "After the client looks at the pencil sketches, they make the decision whether or not to hire me," explains Roberts. "Then I make cut-and-colored-paper designs to scale, using the actual colors. At this stage, the client can make any changes they'd like; then we move forward in clay."

## Other People's Dreams

Nature is Roberts's inspiration. "The other thing that inspires me is joy," she says. "Joy is my inner goal. I want people to look at the work and say, 'Wow, that

feels good.' There's a lot of stuff that goes on in the world that gives us all so much sorrow. If my work can help bring the light and the joy, then I feel like I'm making a contribution. I think that's my purpose here.

"My personality is to create for other people; I love to fulfill someone else's vision. So it's no surprise I work on commissions. I feel very blessed to be so busy," says Roberts, who notes that she works in both the private and public sectors. "That's the key to being a working artist, I think, to be diversified."

Roberts primarily works in two mediums — paint and clay. "The two different skills help each other a lot because they're about color, composition and design. But they do express slightly different things. With clay, I can have people help me, and we can talk while we work. When I paint, I do it alone, and I go more off into some magical place." Roberts's paintings, which mainly feature food, are also commissioned pieces. She recently produced several large paintings of colorful

fruits and vegetables for two locations of Chopped, a local restaurant.

## Humble Beginnings

"My studio is located at my home," says Roberts, "which is in a historic area in the center of Tucson."

Roberts started her art career as a production potter at the Tucson Museum of Art School. "[I] would see how many mugs I could produce in an hour," she recalls.

From mugs, she advanced to vases and mirrors and so on, with each item more challenging than the last. "The work grew, evolved and changed and I started doing more sculptural work," she says. "However, I felt I needed to go back to university to get a background in painting and design, which I did at the University of Arizona."

Additionally, Roberts studied clay



Clay welcome sign, by Gail Roberts, clay tile mosaic, 8.5" x 19"



*Night Blooming Cerus*, by Gail Roberts, custom, clay tile mosaic, 2007  
(based on original drawing by Barbara Terkarian)

throughout the country and abroad because she felt she had a lot of growing to do. "I think to make art you need a background in many different mediums. As an artist, you always need other avenues," she explains. "You need a huge toolbox and a huge amount of experiences, from knowing how to do construction (to engineer large pieces) to designing concepts to learning how to work with people."

### Going Public

Early on, when Roberts had preschool-age children at home, she thought how great it would be to teach clay to young children. So she volunteered in their schools and started teaching at the Jewish Community Center (JCC), where child-development staff also trained her.

"I started writing curriculums for 3- to 5-year-olds and teaching clay classes; then JCC asked me to found an art program, which I ran for several years," says Roberts. "I learned a lot about administration, programming and working with people. But it wasn't really where my heart and soul was, which was making art. I had bigger passions and dreams, so I came back to the studio full time and started pursuing painting and clay."

Seemingly out of the blue, the Ochoa Elementary School called and asked Roberts to create outdoor murals for the school; and they wanted the children to be part of the mural planning. "That was a turning point," admits Roberts. "That project turned me on to the beauty of working with the community and creating art in the public sector."

Another big turning point for

Roberts was obtaining the commission for the Brandi Fenton Memorial Park. And as she took on more and larger commissions, her studio "staff" slowly expanded. "It was the beginning of the studio becoming its own community," says Roberts. "It was also at this time that Tucson artist Lori Ryder began working with me. She is my right hand in all projects; we're quite a team."

She also works with a few part-time staffers and a handful of volunteers (including her mother, from time to time) who exchange their time for Roberts's extensive knowledge. "My role is now more about business, directing and designing. It's a balance.

"To grow continuously in life is just so exciting," Roberts concludes. "Every project that comes to me is a new adventure and experience to try to tackle. It's so thrilling!"

Roberts's work will be exhibited at Stone Studios, 2506 N. Stone Ave., Nov. 8 and 9, as part of TPAC (Tucson/ Pima Arts Council) Open Studio Tours (noon to 5 p.m.). For details about the tour call 624-0595.

In addition, Southern Arizona Aids Foundation Festival for Life attendees can bid on Roberts's work at its upcoming fundraiser, Sunday, Nov. 23. For information about the Festival call 628-7223.

For more information and/or to contact Gail Roberts, visit [www.gailrobertsstudio.com](http://www.gailrobertsstudio.com), or call 906-5706.

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