

## GAIL ROBERTS

This tile artist's work will be on display at the soon-to-be-opened Brandi Fenton Memorial Park.

A glance at Gail T. Roberts' résumé gives you some idea of her restless, driven, zealous personality. Gail's career as an artist has taken her from oil painting to sculptures and ceramics, and from galleries to teaching posts to artist-in-residence and consultant positions throughout Tucson. She admits that, professionally and personally, she's always on the go. "I'm a very wound-up person," she says.

It's hard to think of her as a dental hygienist, which was her first chosen career. But after graduating from college in her home state of Michigan and doing some clay classes for fun, Gail found her calling in ceramic art.

Still, her passion was a part-time one to begin with; she did ceramics in her spare time hours while working as a dental hygienist and helping support her husband Stephen Rubin through the first few years of his career in law.

By then they had settled in Tucson. They had intended to travel extensively after college, but they didn't get farther than the desert Southwest.

"We said, 'Let's have an adventure,'" and Tucson was the first and last stop," she laughs. ▶



ABOVE The artist poses by her first work, an acrylic painting. On the table is one of her later tile works.

OPPOSITE "Picnic Pinot" is a wall piece featuring two- and three-dimensional handmade tiles.

ILLIAN DRUMMOND • PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS VENEKLASEN  
 PRODUCED BY DEBBY LARSEN

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### regional artisan



While still doing her day job, Gail studied at the Tucson Museum of Art, Pima Community College and The University of Arizona. She also managed to raise two children.

Her art reflects her personality: bold, bright and happy. She talks of liking humor and whimsy, and of "wowing" people's backyards. Tile mosaics and ceramic sculptures are what she's most known for, although she also has done some stunning acrylic paintings.

Gail says her own parents never encouraged a career in art, partly due to the fact that her uncle was a "starving artist in New York." So it was only with the encouragement of her husband that, in her early 30s, she finally became an artist full-time. And "artist" is a label she still feels uncomfortable with, even a little undeserving of. ▶



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A portion of the mural work created for Brandi Fenton Memorial Park; many individual clay pieces will make up the mural; these tiles feature donors' names, butterflies and flowers.

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"I was always self-conscious. I thought it sounded arrogant. I say 'I make art' and people say, 'What does that mean?'"

With her CV now bursting with large-scale art commissions, gallery exhibitions, director posts and teaching positions, it's a label she should have no problem with. Her work has appeared at Sunrise Drive Elementary School, in the gardens of Piazza Gavi restaurant, on the walls of the two Chopped restaurant locations, as well as in many private residences in Tucson.

In her own centrally located historic home, there's everything from huge paintings of fast food (some of her work from college) to giant papier mâché pigs (from an exhibition she did for the Invisible Theatre). Outside, her talent for colorful mosaic tile and murals is shown off on the patio floor and the exterior walls.

Two years ago Gail secured her biggest project yet when she was asked to make murals for the new Brandi Fenton Memorial Park near River Road and Dodge Boulevard. The transformation of one of Tucson's historic sites is a public/private effort led by Jon Fenton, president of A.F. Sterling Homes, who lost his 13-year-old daughter Brandi in a car accident in 2003.

Gail and fellow artist Lori Ryder have been working almost full-time on the park project for a year. Their work includes making 76 donor



ABOVE The mailbox outside Gail Roberts' studio is adorned with ceramic flowers.

plaques adorned with ceramic flowers, butterflies and the donors' names, all painstakingly fashioned, fired and painted by hand. Each one takes around 10 hours to make.

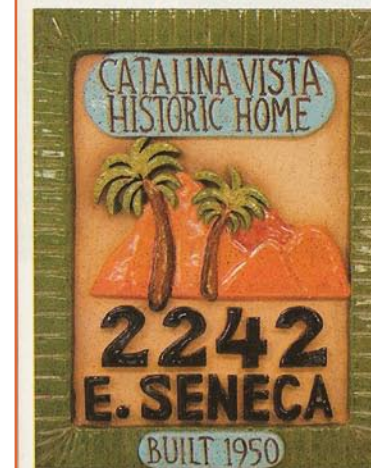
There's also a plaque in direct honor of Brandi, a celebration in ceramic words and pictures of the people and things she loved: tennis, sand dunes, gum and candy among them.

Gail and Lori work from Gail's home studio, which is an add-on built to look like a garage. At this time of year, they often have the garage door open, and neighbors and visitors drop by for a chat and a glimpse of their latest creations.

Now the two are gathering up fans like a pair of Pied Pipers. Other women, some artists, some not, have been asking to work with them, either to learn about ceramics or to help support the park project. Gail says she's had 15 or 20 women putting in time there for free, most recently Brandi's mother April.

Their reward? Sometimes a glass of wine at the end of the day, and a little more.

"It's women sharing intimate, wonderful conversation. It's healing, it's love, it's empowering. The studio space is no longer simply me," she says, referring to the core of artists and volunteers now involved. "I hope to see the studio continue to serve this broader mission of fostering community through artistic collaboration." HG



ABOVE Address plaques can be custom-made for homeowners.

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