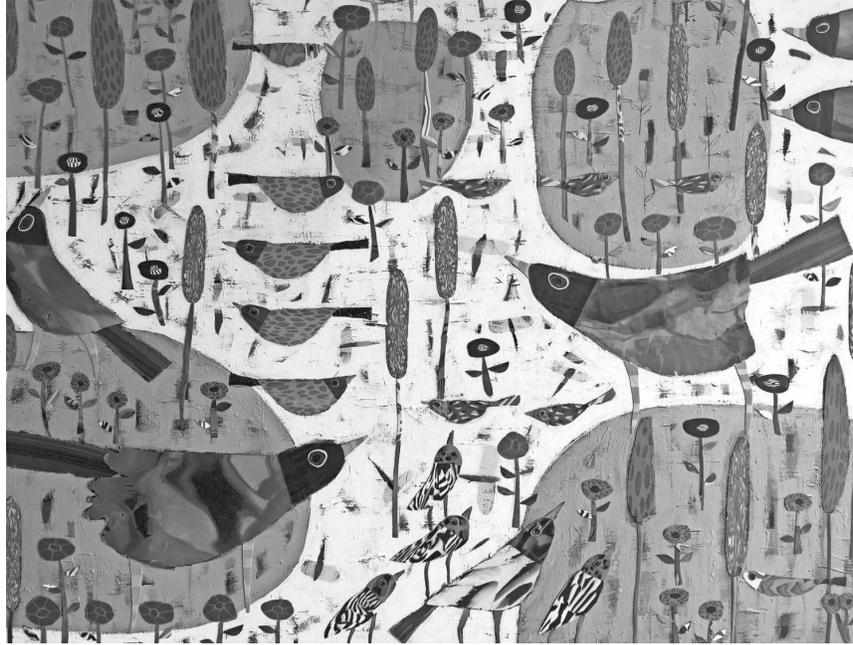


10D ■ SUNDAY, JUNE 3, 2018 ■ TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

# Bird is the word for artist Debo Groover



Community Potluck is one of Debo Groover's polymer clay works now at the Artport Gallery's "Put a Bird on It," exhibition. DEBO GROOVER

Amanda Sieradzki  
Council on Culture & Arts

Out in her garden, artist Debo Groover looks up to the trees. She envisions the throngs of birds that congregate overhead leading parallel lives to her own human one. The birds are equal in this imagined universe, with their own tittering tribulations and celebrations. Florida's green herons, great blue egrets, bluebirds, and painted buntings fascinate Groover.

She will never forget the clever, Texas grackle that pilfered dog food from her neighbor's yard, softened it in her garden's water fountain, and flew it back to his family's nest.

While she tended to her flowers, narratives blossomed and took root Groover's mind. Eventually, they became ready subject matter for her polymer clay work, which can be seen now at the Artport Gallery's "Put a Bird on It," exhibition, curated by the Council on Culture & Arts as part of the Art in Public Places program.

"I was thinking about how these birds in the trees were having little parties that we weren't invited to or when they're at the bird bath it's like a day at the beach," says Groover. "The birds narrate the story in the pieces and sometimes the stories they tell are private, others might be silly, or even more profound politically."

Groover, who founded Deborina Studio with her wife Tina Torrance, enjoys the accessibility of this backyard inspiration. Her creative process usually begins with plays on words or how to anthropomorphize the human activities that make up her daily life. She thinks of the work as sophisticated naivete, much like her favorite artist Pablo Picasso's philosophy of making work with child-like freedom.

Flexing these creative muscles began for Groover as young as age 7, and while she studied and earned her MFA in ceramics from the University of Georgia early on, she didn't begin working as a professional artist until much later in life. She laughs as she recalls the first pot she ever threw on the wheel that weighed in at five pounds despite being only four inches tall.

Groover has taught in universities and community workshops nationally and internationally, sharing her unusual glazing technique she coined as "tortured majolica." However, a house fire in 2000 brought her art making to a halt for many years before she discovered polymer clay.

"I first attempted to make beads," recalls Groover. "[Polymer clay] is counterintuitive to real clay and has got a stickiness that doesn't feel good, so I made a big giant ball that weighed about three pounds and left it on my coffee table for six months before one night I wondered if I could make slabs out of it.



Pull up a Chair is one of Debo Groover's polymer clay works now at the Artport Gallery's "Put a Bird on It," exhibition. DEBO GROOVER

That's when I started treating it like real clay."

Breaking down the material compositions of the two mediums, Groover explains that real clay comes from the earth whereas polymer clay, which was invented in the 1930s, has a plastic, mineral-oil base that is often used for jewelry.

She approached it like a potter however, keeping the material loose and organic rather than rigid, and invented a new technique that collages the clay with acrylics to make multi-media "paintings."

She spent a year working out the

technical difficulties of this new approach before applying her work to shows, but has enjoyed the different learning and creative processes it spawned. First is making batches of the polymer clay, which she does for one week every three to four months.

She likens it to making her own fabric or paper, and tries to maintain any irregularities in the shapes and colors so that they can be uniquely used in her finished work. Though there are technical names attached to this process, Groover delights in relating the steps to the culinary arts.

"I call the millefiori sushi rolls be-

## If you go

**What:** Put a Bird on It: Artworks by Debo Groover, Anne Hempel, and Perdita Ross

**When:** Opening Reception 6-7:30 p.m., Friday, June 8, exhibition runs 9 a.m.-11:30 p.m. through July 16.

**Where:** Artport Gallery, 3300 Capital Circle SW

**Cost:** Free

**Contact:** For more information, visit <http://coca.tallahasseearts.org/art-in-public-places/artport-gallery>.

cause it's built from the inside out," explains Groover of the kaleidoscope-like rolls of clay. "Then I make a taffy pull which is when a couple of colors are twisted and pulled together, and a lasagna strip which are a bunch of parallel sheets of color that are put together. Everything goes into the pasta machine so that it is paper thin, then it's all baked on cookie sheets and parchment paper."

Once she has her raw materials, Groover will take a panel that has been randomly given a multi-colored base, and "paint" with the clay before going in with acrylics and filling in the background. From there, her partner, Torrance, will finish sanding and framing the work to make sure it is show and sale ready. She says it's a "perfect dance" between Torrance's business and behind-the-scenes savvy, while Groover produces and dreams up each work.

One piece that will appear in the Artport exhibition is a depiction of her Indianhead neighborhood's monthly community potluck. Groover embraces the entire color wheel, as rounded green patches serve as perches for her tie-dye swirl of birds. The way in which the mediums blend together requires viewers to take a closer look, as it's an almost imperceptible layer of texture.

Groover knows if someone stands and gazes longer than fifteen seconds, an interesting conversation will surely ensue. These become her favorite moments at shows, as she and the viewer engage with the work. She looks forward to many more bird stories and hearing attendees' thoughts during the "Put a Bird on It" exhibition's opening reception on June 8.

"People love birds, what can you say," laughs Groover. "The one comment I get most of all is that the work makes them happy. People can engage with them, and it puts a smile on their face when they see one."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).