



MAKIN' IT ... SOUTHERN STYLE

Craftspeople bring innovation to traditional artistic endeavours in North Carolina

PAT LEE

North Carolina candlemaker Tiffany Griffin distinctly remembers not only the first candle she sold but who she sold it to, a head-spinning moment for a novice entrepreneur who was giving up a government career to pursue a dream.

"There was a guy named Matt and a woman named Kim who were there before we were even set up at a little pop-up at a coffee shop," the co-founder of Bright Black in Durham recalls. "And we were like, Whoa! I can't believe that someone paid us for this thing."

"It's so scary to create something, and in our case it's kind of heady. Each scent note is telling stories and are entry points into these decades, if not centuries, of Black history."

Griffin and husband Dariel started dabbling in candle making while dating in 2014. A germ of an idea was planted when they received positive feedback from friends and family for the unique handcrafted scents they were coming up with.

By 2019, Griffin, working in Washington, decided it was time to follow a different path by handcrafting candles that were inspired by important events in Black history and culture or iconic cities.

The deal was truly sealed when COVID hit and coincided with "the summer of racial reckoning."

"Within a week our sales had gone up 1,300 per cent, which would typically break a business," she said.

The couple, who have a two-year-old daughter, decided to settle and work in Durham, where Griffin had gone to college, moving production from their basement to a strip mall space they've also transformed into a non-commission gallery for artists or an event facility.

"We really credit a big portion of our success to launching in Durham," she said.

"There's something about this community that if you're doing something a little bit different — for example we have a candle that tells the story of Black Wall Street (the 1921 massacre of Black residents in Tulsa, Okla.) — if you're really trying to do something different and creative and you bring the community along, they're right there with you."

History is a common theme among makers in North Carolina, from relatively new artists such as Griffin, to potters in Seagrove,



Candlemaker Tiffany Griffin shows off her Bright Black store and facility in Durham, N.C. PHOTOS: PAT LEE

whose history can date back centuries.

A small-town mecca in the heart of the state with some 80 working potters and about 50 galleries along the 705, dubbed Pottery Highway, it's a great place to learn about the art and the science of throwing clay.

For Ben Owen, working at a pottery wheel is in his blood, learning the craft at the feet of his father and grandfather.

"I started when I was about nine, working out here after school and

on weekends," Owen said while showing his mastery with a lump of clay and a bit of water, quickly and efficiently moulding it into the shape of an elegant vase.

"Over time (my grandfather) would set me up with a piece and help me to work on my skills. He really helped me build up a foundation to be able to work with materials, and I guess it's learning to push it to the limits and what you can feasibly do with the clay."

Over the years, Owen has travelled the world to steep himself in

the Asian or Middle Eastern influences that continue to move the art form forward and has historic pieces on display in a small museum dedicated to pottery in his studio.

"As a potter, we're half creator and half scientist."

Just down the road, potter Crystal King is also keeping the history of pottery alive by showcasing what's known as face jugs, in her studio.

The whimsical form of folk art was originally done by slaves.

"There's lots of reasons why we

say they did it, but to be honest, I think at the end of a long day of making pots we do what all pottery cultures do, which is we do some face or animal imagery on pots."

King also learned the art from her parents, who "passed the torch" onto her.

"My parents were from here in Seagrove and they apprenticed at one of the old shops with Dorthea and Walter Auman who were eighth-generation potters," King said. "History was very important to (the Aumans) and they encouraged my parents to do folk pottery. Face jugs were a part of that, things that were traditional."

King has also distinguished herself in the pottery world by specializing in animal figurines and clay sculptures.

While Seagrove has cornered the market in potters, you have to take a scenic drive through the Blue Ridge Mountains to Burnsville, a short drive away from Asheville, to find the country's second largest glass-blowing community outside of Seattle.

Keikichi and Tadayoshi Littleton of Hearth Glass Studio are the great-grandchildren of the man considered to be the father of the studio glass movement in the United States.

"My brother and I are fourth-generation glassworkers, although I've been told my great grandfather would kill us for saying that as he never considered himself a glassworker. He was a physicist," Keikichi said while giving a tour of the studio, with glass pieces for sale out front and a workshop taking up most of the rest of the building.

Harvey K. Littleton, who fostered the talents of Dale Chihuly and others, was an educator who came from the world of ceramics and saw the possibilities of adapting the equipment for glass work.

"My grandfather came up with the idea of teaching people to blow glass in their own studios," she said.

The brother and sister are now keeping the tradition alive by renting out the space and the equipment to glass-blowers from far and wide.

"We are an open-access glass studio and gallery. We invite anyone from all walks of life to come into our studio to participate in glass-blowing, to learn about glass-blowing and interact with the artists that work here."

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Keikichi Littleton and her brother Tadayoshi of Hearth Glass Studio in Burnsville, N.C. demonstrate glass-blowing.



Crystal King works on a face jug at her gallery in Seagrove, N.C. King also specializes in figurines and clay sculptures.



Renowned potter Ben Owen works on a vase at his studio in Seagrove, N.C., a mecca for potters.