

# Bits & Pieces

Three mosaic artists, among the best in the state, didn't set out to master that particular form, but once smitten, they have never looked back.

By **Kim Ode**, Star Tribune

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If we're fortunate, we'll experience The Moment -- that instant when we're trying something and realize, with almost overwhelming certainty, that this is what we're meant to do with our lives. Sharra Frank had the moment. So did Sheryl Tuorila. Likewise Mercedes Austin, after first weathering "no" for an answer.

The three women are local mosaic artists, and each occupies a distinctive niche in this piecemeal art form. Josh Blanc, president of the Handmade Tile Association based here, said the three are set apart by their use of handmade tiles, compared to those who break up china or only use found objects.

"They're pushing a different level of mosaic, which has helped these three really rise to the top," Blanc said -- no small achievement in the Twin Cities, a burgeoning hotbed of handmade tile artistry.

While distinctive in their approach, the three share the ability to summon a Zen-like concentration -- as well as a resignation that they never will be able to create all that they have in their heads.

Turn to E8 for a glimpse into how three artists live in their moment:

## SHERYL TUORILA

Flowing ovals for energy

When it comes to making connections, Sheryl Tuorila says, "I don't dink around." She's part of the founding energy behind the Northeast Minneapolis Arts Association, the Minnesota Mosaic Guild and the Northrup King Marketing Group, and worked at the Walker Art Center and her local co-op. She's a joiner and doer.

"I'm my block club leader," she said, laughing, then grew serious. "I need to know people. It's about sharing with people. It creates a better space for you to help others. Being exposed to what others do has affected my work."

Her studio in the Northrup King Building in Northeast Minneapolis shows how her work keeps evolving. Her Zen panels are randomly cut terra cotta ceramic tiles, the arrangement of which is a meditative process. "Hours can go by," she said. "Every once in a while I think, omigod, I'd better stand up."

A new shape she calls flowing ovals conveys more energy. "I want people's eyes to move around." Juxtaposing ceramic tile and stained glass is her new passion. "Where I'm at now is not going to be where I'm at in two years."

Tuorila's degree actually is in printmaking, but eight years ago she discovered the random possibilities in mosaics, "and didn't look back." It's hard work, hefting 50 pound bags of grout or tile-topped tables. She practices yoga to stay strong and focused.

Yoga also may be what helps her stay calm when asked, as she is occasionally: What does your husband do that allows you to do this?

## SHARRA FRANK

Tiny pieces, oversized art

Frank grew up among collectors (OK, garage-salers) as the women of the family browsed auctions and antique stores around Jamestown, N.D., looking for small treasures that came with their own stories. Little wonder, then, that she likes to work with vintage West German rhinestones that come in packages sealed since the 1950s, or with seashells because they once were alive. Imagine the tales.

She always wanted to be an artist, but it was a college art assignment for a paper mosaic project that "sparked an interest I didn't even know I had." She describes her work as the "embellishment of a surface in a way that enhances our lives." Today, those two sheets of pieced paper from college are propped on a shelf full of bottles and vases awaiting transformation in her studio in the Northrup King Building.

Those bottles may wait forever, though. As Frank's mosaic materials grow minuscule, her base objects grow larger: fireplace surrounds, chandeliers, Victorian mirrors. "I want to work bigger and bigger with each piece," she said. Among her inspirations is glass artist Dale Chihuly, whose works have grown from hand-blown glass objects to literal boatloads of glass.

A favorite pursuit is mirror frames overlaid with elaborate patterns of shells, beads, glass or rhinestones. That's partly because mirrors are functional, but also because they confront the issues of body image and acceptance. Seeing ourselves in a different frame can change our perception, Frank said. "I want my frames to help people embrace their reflection."

Frank, 28, credits her early success partly to having started a business while still at the University of Minnesota, making the most of its built-in networks. "I'm grateful to be able to do something I'm passionate about so early in my life."

## MERCEDES AUSTIN

Tile design for kitchens, baths

Before a trade show, Austin uses brochures, samples and her website to whet clients' interest in her mosaic tiles. She knows if they meet her first, they'll think she's the owner's little sister. But she's 29, and savvier than many older artists.

She defines her business less as artistic venture and more as a tile production company, touting mosaic designs for kitchens and bathrooms, and featuring an array of ceramic switchplates. She loves what she calls "the whole art of the business," but also knows how that sounds to some. "People don't necessarily say 'sell-out,' but there's something that turns creative types off making the same thing over and over again. But I'm providing people with jobs. I want this to become my bread-and-butter, so I can create my art."

Austin was majoring in art at the University of Minnesota when she ambled into a shop of handmade tiles. "Need any help?" she asked. Nope. They eventually called her back, which led to a job of several years.

But Austin always wanted her own company. She studied with a mosaic master in Italy, where she bartered for lunch in exchange for correcting the grammar on his website. Then she returned to open Mercury Mosaics, 125 W. Broadway in Minneapolis, in what was an old bowling alley. Here, a team of six studio employees works on benches that once were the hardwood lanes, making tiles that are shipped to high-end showrooms in 17 states.

Yet on a table in the back is a stunning desk-sized mosaic for Bet Shalom Synagogue in Hopkins, a gift for their longtime rabbi. Hundreds of pieces are arranged to reveal Abraham and Sarah welcoming strangers to their desert home. The palms' trunks and the stream's banks are bits of 2,000-year-old pottery collected by synagogue member Bruce Goldstein.

Austin tells him how she'll use different colors of grout to give the flat surface some dimension, the final steps of dozens of hours of bending, nudging, shipping, fitting. Mosaic work is more physically demanding than many think.

Typically, Austin is thinking ahead. She's practiced tai chi for nine years to learn how to stand with the least amount of exertion. Now she's begun chiropractic "maintenance" to counter the effects of leaning over tables and kilns. "I want to do this till I'm 80."

Not all artists are, ahem, starving. You can sit on Tuorila's mosaic benches at the Ridgedale Library, see her 7-foot-tall carrot by the Eastside Food Co-op in northeast Minneapolis or wait by one of her wall panels at the Park Nicollet Clinic in Chaska. In short, she makes a living.

Good thing, since she can't imagine doing anything else.

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