

Bob Doster, Sculptor

By Rosie O'Rear



Widely renowned, Bob Doster chooses to work in his hometown of Lancaster. Below: a component of the "Nautilus" series of sculptures he began during the 1970s.

At Home in His Hometown, He Focuses on the Culture That Shaped Him

It is late afternoon when Bob Doster arrives at his sculpture studio in downtown Lancaster. A big man with a shock of white hair, he gets out of a pick-up truck. He wears work jeans, a T-shirt advertising the Flopeye Fish Festival, and reading glasses. The glasses are blue, curvy and decorated with rhinestones.

The spectacles make you smile as they are a glaring exception to Doster's manly-man image. They suggest a confident person with a lively sense of humor who is not terribly concerned with image.

Doster's studio suggests the same. It's really more of a complex, a row of formerly derelict buildings that in their heyday were a pool hall, grocery store and beer bottling company. Doster reclaimed them in the 1980s and '90s. They are painted in bright colors and decorated with china shards and found objects.

You enter through a double door Doster made from stainless steel scraps. The scene is the opposite of institutional. You want to come in.

Doster, 60, is just back from a day helping a class of elementary school students create a sculpture to go on permanent display at their school. Taking age and grade level into account, he says he guides students in all the steps of making a thing from designing and drawing to creating and installing. According to his count, he's taught pottery and sculpture for 30



years to an estimated 120,000 students in South Carolina's public schools.

Not one to toot his own horn, what he won't tell you is how good he is at what he does—though others will. But more about that later.

Back home in his studio (officially named Bob Doster's Backstreet Studio), Doster is a sculptor

again. On his work table is a highly detailed 5- by 8-foot Chinese-style dragon. The commissioned piece will attach to double gates outside a Rock Hill home.

It begins to register just how sprawling Doster's interests and talents are when you see the gallery and garden sections of Backstreet that the sculptor has renovated over the years. The place is a testimony to what a creative mind can accomplish on a limited budget. Displayed is not only work by Doster and his wife Cherry but artwork of friends he's bartered with over the years. Doster says he owns all of it and everything is for sale.

The garden at Backstreet is a blocked-off storefront and thus something of a secret. "Most people don't know it's here," Doster says. The focal point is a koi pond with moisture-loving irises around its banks. Odd green foliage sprouts from the top of a miniature Japanese red maple, and part of a curved wall is covered with tiles put on it willy-nilly by schoolchildren.

ALIVE WITH ART: Cherry Doster and the Avant Garde Center for the Arts

Article & Photo by Glinda Price Coleman

In early 2009, Cherry Doster stood in the middle of a former dime store in Great Falls, staring at the ceiling. There were a few holes, some old soundproof tiles and various pipes, hooks and nails. Then she looked at the floor, stripped of its old tile and linoleum, and an idea formulated in her artistic mind. Here was an opportunity for art students to be creative.

Now the building has a cloth ceiling and an abstract design on the floor. “I just let them sit down and do what they want,” she said, looking down at the neon and primary color abstracts at her feet.

Cherry Doster, wife of artist Bob Doster, is a native of Great Falls. Less than two years ago she decided to create the Avant Garde Center for the Arts in her home town. When she saw the old Eagle Dime Store, she knew it could work for her venture.

The Dosters live in Van Wyck, in Lancaster County, but they own a house in Great Falls and spend a lot of time in the small former textile town that has struggled for the past 20 years to rebuild its economy. For five years, Cherry was director of the Lancaster Council of the Arts, and before that, director of sales and marketing for Leroy Springs Company. She studied art at the University of South Carolina-Lancaster—under Bob, no less, and at Coastal Carolina.

What prompted her to come back and open an arts center in rural Chester County? “My inspiration came from the Great Falls Home Town Association [GFHTA] and their support of the arts and cultural heritage in the area. I saw that organization as a resource to start something here.”

Cherry is big on partnerships. The center’s mission is to develop partnerships with other agencies and provide arts opportunities in a place that is underserved. While being a native influenced her decision to open the center, she also saw advantages and potential in the Catawba River town where she grew up.

The center opened in March, and already a huge artistic impression has been made. Local business owner David McKeown thinks it’s just what Great Falls needs. “The center allows artists to teach within the community, drawing the general public from surrounding areas as well as serving the local people,” Mc-

It’s a slightly askew scene Lewis Carroll’s Alice might be comfortable in. Things are not totally square or finished or perfect—and that is the charm.

Doster made the steel “courting bench” he is sitting on. The male and female figures forming the back are one-dimensional and so resemble children’s art or folk art. Doster made the female’s hair to look like she just had electroshock therapy—an example of that ever-present humor.

Nearby is another Doster piece, a handsome arch. Twice the size of the sculptor, it’s made of Corten steel scraps welded together. The surface has a heavy rust patina. Playful, classical, contemporary, figurative, primitive—with more than 30 years of work under his belt, Doster’s sculptures fall into all these categories. “It is what it is,” he says simply. “I do what I do and it ranges all over the place.”

Examples of his impressive versatility are a mobile of the planets in the labor and delivery suite of Stanly Memorial Hospital in Albemarle, North Carolina; a fighter plane in the home of a patron; a monumental piece called “Rising Star” at Main and College streets in Greenville; and a 40-foot, high-resolution rocket for the *Challenger* Learning Center in Columbia that he is building to scale. This doesn’t

include literally hundreds of collaborations with schoolchildren on display at public schools across the state.

Cherry Doster, who Doster describes as a “marketing genius,” has taken on the yeoman’s job of cataloging her husband’s work. He’s been doing it so long and moves from project to project so fast it’s hard to keep up, she says. In Lancaster alone, Cherry has identified Doster pieces at the University of South Carolina at Lancaster, on downtown streets, at the arts council and in private residences and public schools. She figures there are about 25 Doster sculptures in the county’s public places and “literally thousands” in private homes, thanks to locals who’ve been collecting his pieces since his graduate school years.

In his quest to live off his art, Doster says he increasingly depends on commissions. Thanks to his talent and reputation, some big ones lately have come his way. For instance, in a medical building at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, Doster created depictions of DNA strands in brass and steel that are displayed in a five-story lobby. An equally dramatic, 40-foot-high, polished, stainless steel piece can be found Saks Fifth Avenue in Atlanta. Shoppers see it from different angles as they ride the escalator.



Keown said. “She has proven that art has a place in everyone’s life and can be a leading force in restoring a once-prosperous town.”

In the past year and a half—even before the building was ready—there have been two successful arts camps serving almost 150 children, rotating gallery shows, a dinner theater, a partnership with GFHTA on a summer music series, and numerous drawing, dance, photography and sculpture classes for all ages. The town is alive with art.

“We are so pleased that Cherry has opened the arts center downtown,” said Dr. H.C. “Speedy” Starnes, mayor of Great Falls. “It is a boost for our Nature Based Tourism Initiative and economic development of the town.”

Cherry welcomes everyone to see what’s going on. She lives by her Web site’s motto: CULTURAL VISION WITH NO LIMITS. ❖

Glinda Price Coleman, a former newspaper writer and editor in Chester, is executive director of the Great Falls Home Town Association.

The Avant Garde Center for the Arts is at 621 Dearborn Street in Great Falls. See www.avantgarde-centerforthearts.org or call (803) 287-7853.

Recognition has come fast and furious. Doster was the featured artist for the 2008-09 academic year at the University of South Carolina Upstate in Spartanburg. He created eight large, metal sculptures for the occasion that are located around the campus.

“I look for working artists,” says Jane Nodine, director of the USC Upstate campus art gallery. “I’ve known Bob ever since we were in graduate school. He’s so very involved in arts education.”

Doster’s 1,200 pound, 18-foot high “Flight” is Nodine’s favorite among the pieces on display. “It’s outside the arts center and a metaphor for the way we work with students,” she explains. The abstract resembles a “stylized bird. It has an uplifting feeling.”

Two pieces in the display are crosses that sparked controversy on campus; some African American students believed they were installed to support the Ku Klux Klan. Nodine says Doster was glad his pieces provoked thought and was happy to discuss the pieces at an open forum. This quelled the controversy.

If money were no object, “I’d be building really big pieces,” Doster says—such as the ones on display at USC Upstate.

But they don’t bring income the way commissions do, or that popular stainless steel palmetto tree.

He makes the trees in several sizes ranging in price from \$75 to \$300. Doster credits a sister for thinking up the bread-and-butter item. “She begged me to make the trees. She said she’d sell 10. She ended up selling 100.”

Because of their appeal and affordability, Doster today makes palmetto trees by the hundreds.

The “other Doster” is a teacher—a “brilliant” one, says Nikki Barnes, a longtime friend, patron and collaborator. “I’ve watched him teach. Kids are eating out of his hand in 10 minutes. He doesn’t take any lip. He calls them on it. When he does, it brings forth laughter.”

Official recognition came in 2006 when Doster won the Elizabeth O’Neill Verner award, a governor’s award in the individual artist category. “It’s the highest award given to artists in South Carolina,” says Rusty Sox, program coordinator of the awards, which are presented by the South Carolina Arts Commission. In Doster’s case, service to the community—“particularly related to his work in the schools”—was being recognized.

Three decades ago, Doster’s name was placed on the SCAC’s Roster of Approved Artists. The program,



Bob Doster's wall perhaps exemplifies the artisan and his media. Below: Doster works with student Kristin Carpenter at the Avant Garde Center for the Arts in Great Falls. Opposite: pottery by some of Doster's students.

which enables approved visual and performing artists to receive grants in exchange for residencies in public schools and other arts education settings, is a unique opportunity for students to work and rub shoulders with a professional artist.

"Schools are doubly blessed," says Katie Fox, director of arts and education for the commission, speaking of Doster. "Not only do the schools benefit from having an artist; they have a piece of artwork for years to come."

In Kershaw County, second graders drew images of horses to honor a major pastime of the area. "Bob fashioned their drawings into a single design that became a bench," says Susan DuPlessis, former director of the Fine Arts Center of Kershaw County. A high point of Doster's residency was a field trip to his studio. "It was an opportunity to see that kind of equipment," DuPlessis explains. "You could see the little sparks flying."

In Irmo, Doster helped Dutch Fork High School students build a likeness of their mascot, a wolf. At Indian Land Middle School in Fort Mill, he helped students fashion a bench using combined images of snakes, fish, animals and birds they then painted. Students at McDonald Green Elementary School in Lancaster made large steel dinosaurs, with math and science teachers instructing alongside the artist. Under Doster's tutelage, Cheraw students cre-



PHOTO BY NANCY CARPENTER

ated benches honoring jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie; the benches are located in the Dizzy Gillespie Birthplace Park, which honors the Cheraw native.

(Separate from his work with schoolchildren, Doster built an 80-foot-long stainless steel fence for the Gillespie park, embedding the notes to the trumpeter's famous song "Salt Peanuts" into the design.)

Doster is characteristically low key about any impact he's had on students. "When kids start something, they have no clues as to what they can make.

They learn a process from start to finish. They complete something. I don't look at myself as teaching art, but life skills."

Son of a prominent Lancaster family, Doster with five younger sisters grew up in a home that is visible from his studio. His describes his father Robert as a larger-than-life judge, entrepreneur, World War II pilot, artist and folk art collector.

Today, the only Doster remaining in Lancaster is Bob. His father is dead, his mother Jean lives in Columbia and his sisters are all successful and scattered to the winds. One son, Tom, died in a car accident. The other son, Bob, is an arts consultant in Raleigh.

In this mobile society where folks with artistic leanings often feel pressured to strike out for bigger territory, why has Doster stayed put?

His answer is simple. "My sons were here and I had custody of them." So even though the time might have been right—he'd just completed a master of fine arts degree at Clemson University—he moved home. "I have no regrets. I'm happy to be here."

Other pluses are cheap studio space and easy access to beaches, mountains and cities. "And with the Internet, you don't have to be in a big city."

And so he became a fixture, a prominent citizen in his own right, someone



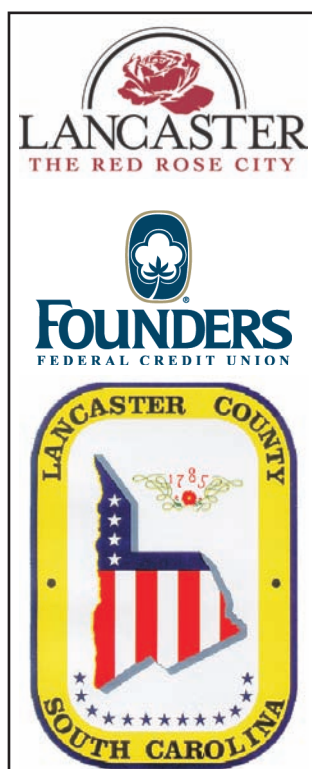
you can depend on to promote the town and give back to the town.

"Bob gives an added reason to visit the area," says Jayne Scarborough, director of the Olde English tourism region for the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism. "Once someone goes to the gallery and gardens, they feel like they've known Bob forever. He's so comfortable with his craft and in sharing his vision with others."

Eager to do what they can to enrich their community, the Dosters frequently open their gallery for events they sponsor solo and as partners with the Lancaster Council of the Arts and area businesses—even the Saturday farmer's market. Such events might include storytelling or drama, dance or special food, Cherry Doster says. "It's a way people can come in and get exposure to the arts."

"Bob is a good example of the fabric of South Carolina," says Nodine of the USC Upstate gallery. "I think he's part of the culture and he gives back to the culture. He could have chosen a more privileged life, but I don't think it would have made him happy. He's in touch with his culture and his group. I think that's important." ❖

Rosie O'Rear frequently writes about the arts. She lives in Charlotte.



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