

THE LAUREL OF
ASHEVILLE

MAY 2012

THE ARTS AND CULTURE OF COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE MOUNTAINS





*Kreh
Mellick*

STORY BY PAUL M. HOWEY

When Kreh Mellick was a little girl growing up in New Jersey, her mother told her it was the barn owl that brought her birthday cake. "I have a picture in mind of it flying down from our front door and opening that door and seeing my birthday cake perched on the stoop," says Kreh. "My mother told me lots of stories and little fibs, and I would create a visual world where the characters, or truths, reside.

"Parts of my childhood felt like a storybook," says Kreh. She tells of a group of sisters, friends of her mother, whose homes had murals painted on the walls, including one of a woman on the back of a flying goose."

These sisters owned a local toy store at which the "bunny hole" was an annual event. Kreh describes a slide that would whisk children into a dark tunnel beneath the ground where illuminated holes displayed families of animals busily going about their daily chores.

Kreh recalls a time as a little girl when her mother was wearing a polka dot dress. "I thought she looked

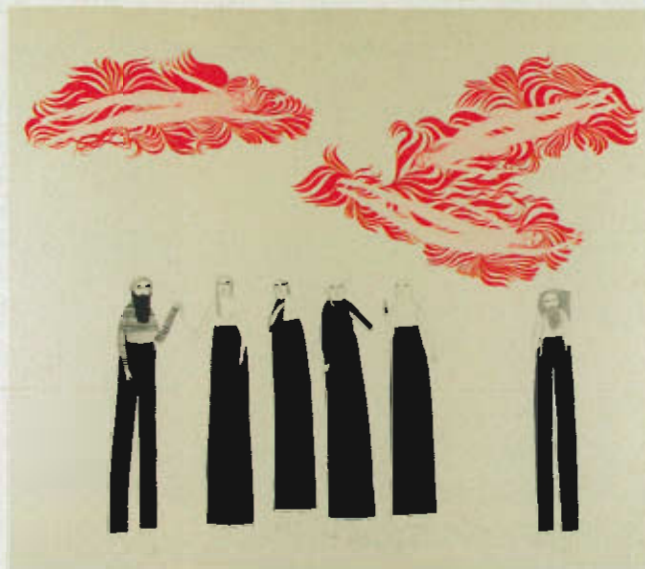
so beautiful and I had an overwhelming urge to draw her portrait." Kreh, however, was unable to make the drawing look like her mother.

"There was a huge feeling of defeat, but also excitement that this need was so strong and that it was going to be within my grasp. Somehow."

The first of many teachers to help guide her on her artistic path ("however shy and fearful I felt") was her high school art teacher. "She showed me that my love and desire to be an artist did not have to be scary, and that it was worth pursuing."

She attended a precollege program at Rhode Island School of Design, and then went on to earn her bachelor of fine arts in illustration and drawing degree from Maine College of Art. While at the school in Maine, she became fascinated by the art of bookbinding and decided that's what she wanted to do. She was accepted into the CORE Fellowship Program at Western North Carolina's Penland School of Crafts.

"I had an idyllic view of these Smoky Mountains," says Kreh, "with wooden cabins and old men that sat



on porches and told long, winding stories. And women that lived deep in the woods with goats and collections of jars.

"The reality is there are magical people hidden in the hillsides, it just takes some looking. And I found I did not want to be a bookbinder. I wanted to be the old man on the porch with the long, winding story."

She began to explore her artistic options, trying her hand at ceramics, textiles, letterpress, printmaking, and jewelry. "I pursued the idea that if I knew how to do many things that maybe I would be good at one thing."

Kreh still doubted her ability to make drawings, although that's really all she'd ever dreamed of doing. Fortunately, Penland turned out to be the perfect incubator for her talent.

"I worked and I practiced what I knew to make it better. I had incredible mentors and peers. Penland let me realize I could do whatever I wanted, draw any way I wanted, and draw anything I wanted."

After two years in the mountains, she accepted an artist-in-residency opportunity in Iceland where she embraced the country's folklore and sagas. "They're very much a part of modern beliefs, and this was something I was looking for—that people can still live and value their history. Being immersed in this allowed me to dream up newer stories..." Next up, Asheville.

"My sweetheart, Andrew Hayes, had been offered the opportunity to work here for his mentor Hoss Haley, and that was an opportunity he couldn't pass up. Hoss and his wife Leslie Noell have been so important to us as mentors and as fellow artists."

In her most recent works, Kreh is working "with the idea of the living and the presence of the unreal. ... When one strikes out in the world, all of our baggage comes with us, and most of that exists in a place where your environment cannot see. "I think these drawings are sometimes just what falls out of my head when I sit a desk."

To see more of Kreh Mellick's drawings, visit krehmellick.com. Her work can also be seen at Blue Spiral 7, 38 Biltmore Avenue in downtown Asheville.