

Dogs are this artist's best friend

Mary Engel
(MFA '93) turns
found objects
into unique
animal sculpture



ALLYSON MANN

Engel works on "Frida," a sculpture now on display at Saks Fifth Avenue in New York. Photo below is of "Jeremiah."

by Allyson Mann (MA '92)

Sculptor Mary Engel finds boxes left anonymously on her front porch. Inside are items most people would consider junk. But for Engel—and fans of her work—they're art materials. Engel (MFA '93) creates mixed media pieces that combine animal imagery with everyday objects like jewelry, figurines, buttons, keys and coins. "I like the idea that objects can conjure memories," she says.

Engel's work is rooted in the tradition of Southern memory jars—bottles or ceramic jugs with everyday objects attached to the surface. She began by creating vessels covered with animals; over time the animals got bigger and the vessels disappeared. Today her sculptures portray a variety of animals, but dogs are her favorite subject. A long-time rescuer of abandoned animals, Engel finds inspiration in her own dogs, Mingo and Bonnie, who visit her Athens studio every day.

Art collector Jo Hunsinger owns eight of Engel's sculptures, seven of which are dogs. "All of them have the essence of a different dog personality in them," she says. "It's amazing that she captures them as she does."

The combination of her unique talent and people's love for animals has brought Engel much acclaim and attention. HGTV ran a segment on her in October. *Southern Living* will feature her in February. The Detroit Zoo hired Engel to create an elephant sculpture. ESPN commissioned a bulldog and a yellow jacket. Sculptures "Frida" and "Steven" are on display at Saks Fifth Avenue in New York. Barkology created a line of cards featuring her work. Her client list includes Michael Stipe and Arthur Blank. And when she's not busy in her studio, she's teaching workshops in exotic locales like Snowmass, Colo.

Engel starts by building the structure—wire mesh covered by fiberglass fabric dipped in hydrocal, a cement-like material. Then she works to capture the animal's form and movement. Next, she covers small sections with epoxy, working an hour at a time, then adds objects that give the surface texture and color. She works intuitively and spontaneously, smashing objects with a hammer and making quick decisions about which piece to use and where to place it.

Next up on Engel's calendar is a solo show that will open Dec. 9 at the Marcia Wood Gallery in Atlanta. While she works, "Big Blue" and "Magma" stand guard outside. These life-sized pooches were created for a 2002 show at the Atlanta Botanical Garden and are so lifelike that visiting dogs sniff them in the unique manner of dogs meeting for the first time.

"I consider it a compliment," says Engel.

For more information, visit www.maryengel.net.



SPECIAL