

Sculpting with

Air and Latex

by Lee Allen

Balloon sculptures are one of life's more *transitory pleasures*," says Fred Harshberger, a gold medalist in the World Clown Association's Masters Balloon Sculpture Competition. Known professionally as the Balloon Dude (www.BalloonDude.com), Harshberger is both a magician and balloon artist who combines these talents to win his honors. "I try to make the presentation process a performance rather than just manufacturing a product," he says. "Sculpting with air and latex is an art as well as a craft, so why not be entertaining as well?"

Harshberger, based in the Los Angeles area, will travel for the right balloon gig and did so recently, entertaining on a Carnival Fun Ship cruise off the coast of Southern California. While tuxedoed waiters bustled about serving dinner, Harshberger was the center of attention each night as he pulled out his balloon bag and began assembling an elaborate table centerpiece — one evening a majestic rose with many petals, the next a dolphin splashing in the waves, another a monkey sitting in a palm tree eating a banana. Hearing familiar oohs and aahs from spectators watching him work, Harshberger said he received as much enjoyment as he gave: "I enjoy balloon sculpting partly for the artistic outlet, working out technical design aspects and seeing creative concepts take form," he says. "But really, it's mostly about bringing enjoyment to others. When I create a balloon design before the eyes of a child, it makes them smile — and the smile of a child is priceless."

"I like the smile quotient in this field of air-filled artwork."

Tucson has its own balloon artist community, ranging in experience from neophyte to longtime professional. "You got a taste of the craze with Fred, and it's contagious," says Tucson balloonist Laurie Lefebvre (www.laur-loons.com). "There are so many priceless moments that come out from the magic of this art. Kid's rock. They follow you with their eyes and their mind in the most innocent way. They make me smile, I make them smile, and the moment is better for all of us."

Lefebvre was taught five basic balloon twists by one of her University of Arizona professors, and that's all it took to begin a career that's now in its eighth year. "My plan was to get an advanced professional degree, but I found every time I was in a classroom, I'd be sitting there drawing pictures of balloon sculptures instead of listening to the lectures. Two college degrees later, balloon art remains one of the most marketable skills I've learned."

Balloon artists traditionally settle in to a specific style. Twister/entertainers are often clowns who make stick-figure balloon creations; twisters make multiballoon figures, frequently animals.

Linda Gill, who bills herself as the Balloon Lady of Tucson (www.balloon-lady.biz), got into the business in the mid-1980s by delivering balloon bouquets in upstate New York. She is a Certified Balloon Artist who practices balloon decorating. "Twisters call us 'stackers' because we pile balloons and make decorative arches and



Laurie Lefebvre of Laur-Loons Balloons Artistry wears one of her balloon creations.

sculptures," she says. Her portfolio shows sample creations made for ESPN, Costco, CompUSA, corporate parties, quinceaneras, bar mitzvahs, proms, weddings and other special events. "I even did my kids' high-school proms, with a full-sized, working carousel with horses and music. Their class got \$3,000 worth of creativity at a fraction of the price," she says.

"I like the smile quotient in this field of air-filled artwork. Laughs and smiles are always associated with what we do," says Larry Goldstein of Twisted Entertainment (www.members.cox.net/twistedtucson). "People love balloons no matter how big of a kid they are, and truth be told, I love the ability to be a kid, too, no matter how old I get."

Goldstein both twists and stacks balloons and has done so off and on since age nine, when a retired circus clown taught him how to make a balloon dog. He answers to "twister" and "stacker" but prefers to be called a balloon sculptor, a latex engineer, an "airagamist" (Goldstein's term for "one who practices the art of folding air") or, Goldstein says, "a doctor of balloontology, as my mother calls me because she always wanted a doctor in the family."

The rose-by-any-other-name-is-still-a-rose feuding prompts a lot of sensitive responses from both sides of the twister/stacker fence. "Art is anything you can get away with," insists Harshberger. "A balloon artist would be someone who does something artistic with balloons. Whether a sculpture is created by arranging round balloons into a shape or twisting long skinny balloons into a shape, both could be artistic. Granted, you'll get paid a lot more for a big wall with a stack of balloons and a company logo, but that seems to me to be more a feat of engineering than artistry."

Locally, some two dozen artists compete for twister contracts. Although summers are lean times, there apparently is enough balloon work to make a living in Tucson. "There's a nice niche here, and there are balloon artists who pay their mortgage doing this full-time," says Lefebvre, who has been hired by Wal-Mart, banks and grocery stores, as well as for holiday-season events and private parties. "When it's good, it's good," she says. Goldstein also has a "real job" in the workaday world, spending days as a graphic artist and nights tying balloons at Outback Steakhouse.

There's a bit less competition for those who do the more artistic work, half a dozen Tucsonans who call themselves decorator artists. "Although the industry here is somewhat seasonal," says Gill, "the jobs are here, and I'm booked with assignments over the next six months. I work regularly out of La Paloma, Ventana Canyon, El Conquistador, Westward Look — they all know me. Because I'm in a worldwide network because of my certification, I don't have to advertise for jobs."

"I don't generally recommend making a living blowing up balloons," says Harshberger, a married father of four who adds to his annual income with work as both a clown and a magician. "It's not the most lucrative of professions unless you can learn to live on the sounds of laughter that your creations cause."

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