





A world of whimsy

Lillian Alberti puts a unique face on the art of dollmaking

By MJ Hanley-Goff

Her studio is in a sunny corner of her Warwick kitchen. A rollaway cart of shelves holds most of the tools of her trade: tiny-bristled paint brushes, razor-sharp cutting knives, tubes of paint and soldering wire. Though these items seem ordinary, what Lillian Alberti creates is altogether extraordinary. She makes dolls, grotesque dolls. Not the kind with sugary sweet, angelic faces, but with “whimsical” expressions, exaggerated facial features, far from beautiful, but oozing with interest.

Take her “Alice” doll, which stands 16 inches tall. Her face says it all: The world she has just entered doesn’t make sense. The accompanying tag reads, “ ‘How absurd,’ ” thought Alice. “ ‘What could he possibly be late for?’ ”

“He,” of course, is the White Rabbit, who has just rushed into a hole. Alice’s hair, created from Tibetan lamb’s hair, is wild and scraggly, befitting someone who has just traveled through a looking glass. Her outfit fits the time period of the story,



"Alice" is made from clay over wire and cloth armature and Tibetan lambskin "hair." She is 16 inches tall. Lillian Alberti creates dolls that are whimsical and unique, with exaggerated, sometimes grotesque, features.

and her clownish socks remind us that in her world, she was a bit of an eccentric. Her fingers are long and expressive, her legs thin and bony. Under her skirt – excuse me for looking – is a layer of lace and polka-dotted bloomers that complete a wonderfully imaginative creation.

A L'il Whimsy is the home business that Alberti created when it was time to leave her fashion and design job in Manhattan to be a stay-at-home mom to her two daughters. "My husband and I were living in Peekskill at the time and we were looking to move farther from the city. Our Realtor said to try Orange County. I thought, 'Where is Orange County?' We came for a quick tour of Warwick, and saw this great house, and knew immediately this was it."

That was 2002. Thoughts of a home business involving fashion was always in her mind, and, originally, she

had moderate success with a home furnishing business making slipcovers, pillows, potpourri and other home décor items. "But I'll never forget the moment I saw these dolls in Tiffany's windows," Alberti explains. "I was walking past their Fifth Avenue store and was astounded by this particular window display. I knew I wanted to make something similar." Her first doll was created 18 years ago.

The prettiness of traditional dolls wasn't realistic, Alberti believes. "There are so many adorable dolls out there," she says. "I wanted ones that were unique, and just plain fun." Whimsical is how she explains it, and the name of her company was a "natural progression." There was also a natural progression in her creations. "Artists naturally evolve over time," Alberti explains. "I'm always experimenting with new material and techniques. My original doll was a head on a stick, called a 'poppet.'"

Lillian Alberti paints the eyes on "Little Bo Peep's" face. She details the eyes first, to be better able to capture the expression on the rest of the face. Below, one of Alberti's "poppets," which actually is a head on a stick.



Then I made a ballerina that stood 30 inches tall. Now I make them with elongated fingers and lankier bodies, and keep them to between 18 and 22 inches tall, which is the perfect size for collectors. I used a glossy paint in the past, which gave the faces a soft-glow look, but now I prefer a more matte finish."

Alberti doesn't need pamphlets or brochures to publicize her business; her website, a-lil-whimsy.com, does just fine in taking sales, and, more importantly, has given her global recognition.

Alberti is a slender, wide-eyed woman, amiable and down to earth. Not only is she a great salesperson for her business, but is also an ambassador for the doll-making craft. She visits doll clubs across the country to lecture and give workshops, a facet of this new world that came as a surprise. "I didn't think I'd have a business like this where I could travel and meet so many creative people, doll collectors, and those who want to try their hand at making their own." And it has given her some notoriety, as some of her works were on display at the one-time well-known Mann Gallery in Boston. She's also been on display closer to home at the Port of Call in Warwick and, more recently, at the Guild of Creative Art in Shrewsbury, N.J.

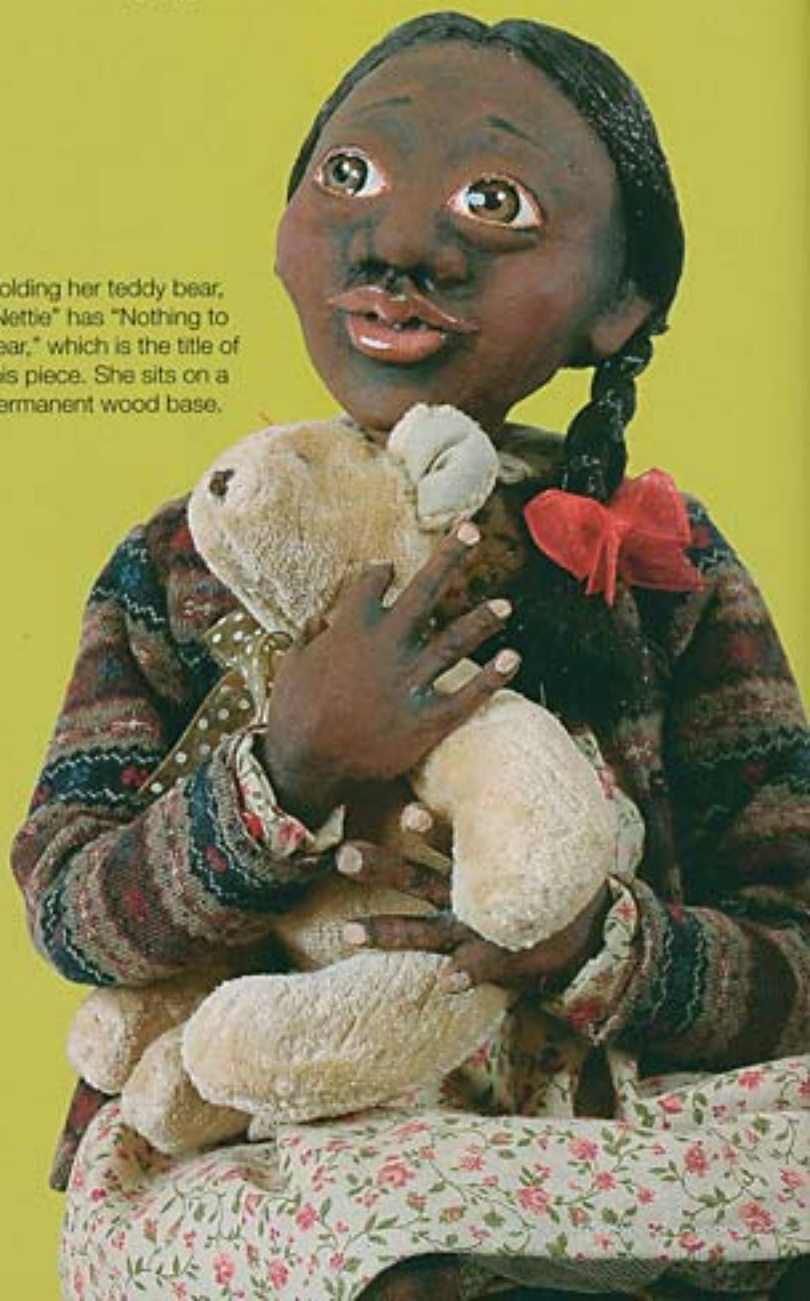
But there's more than dolls here.

"Silhouettes," behind glass with delicately cut and carved child-aged characters, usually are out in nature, beside a lake or a tree. They're multi-layered, and have what she calls a "jazzy" background in a "distressed" frame. "These," Alberti notes, "are perfect for a new baby's room." Then there are the shadow boxes, her "tiny windows into a magical world."



One depicts a giant named George (she just liked the name), handing his miniature wife a gift: a large tree, evidently just yanked from the ground. In just one scene, Alberti has told a folk tale. "You see, having a giant for a husband is probably a big pain," she says with a ready laugh. "He probably breaks the furniture and knocks things over. But with this gesture, he shows his deep love for her." However, it wasn't the dolls, or the silhouettes, or the shadow boxes that came first. It was the mural she painted in her daughter's bedroom that caught the attention of friends and acquaintances, and soon Alberti was painting murals in other homes. She refers to them as "decorative arts for wee ones." Each has a fairy-tale theme, usually related to the "Hey Diddle, Diddle" children's rhyme, with "The dish ran away with the spoon," and "The cow jumped over the moon" scenes. "Sweet Dreams" features a young girl looking into the star-filled night sky, a snoozing crescent moon hanging overhead. Her most magical has to be the "three-dimensional tree" placed into the corner of the room, with leaves and a swing painted on the wall. It was done for a friend, and soon became one of her most popular murals. Just as Alberti's two daughters have shown signs of inheriting their mother's artistic eye, so has Alberti received the skills and desire to be an artist from her parents. "My mom was a singer and a painter, and my dad was a wood carver and a painter. Two other relatives are painters." And what about her husband? "He is just so wonderfully supportive."

Holding her teddy bear, "Nettie" has "Nothing to Fear," which is the title of this piece. She sits on a permanent wood base.



Lilian Alberti puts a staff in the hand of what will become "Little Bo Beep," complete with a teardrop on her face as she searches for her sheep.