

Inside the Artist - Susan Bayer-Fishman August 2016



Sitting in incredibly comfortable and stylish designer lounge chairs in the Stowe Artisan Gallery, Susan Bayer-Fishman, a stained glass artist and interior designer, shares with us how she spends her days grounding living spaces in her clients' authenticity with hand-made pieces that provide "soul" in their living environments...or in an event space, "or restaurant, or whatever (The Hayloft) may become." Her secret for success: being who you are and "We're not about re-dos."

How did you get started? How did you get to this place now?

I was a stained glass studio artist and opened my first studio in '78 in my home on Guptil Road where I still live. We moved from Forestdale near Brandon, and my husband got a position running a program at the State Hospital so we left this beautiful little home that I had actually built myself. I spent two years on it, it was not big, but it took me two years to finish it. I had never built before.

So the house that I built in Brandon was built out of recycled materials because they were free. I went to a bank to get a loan and a woman alone...they looked at me very strange and they certainly did not give me any money, and I had no idea that they wouldn't get any. So I went to the local lumber mill and they thought it was amusing that a woman was going to build a house on her own and they let me develop terms. It was green lumber but I was so slow that it dried and twisted and needed to do what it needed to do before the sheetrock went on. I took the old floor from the Rochester School House, cleaned it, put it down....so just a lot of hard labor. But when it was all done, it was pretty cute, but it was really unusual, and I thought I would never have a buyer. Steven and I were together at that point and he got offered a job up this way and so we had to sell the house. I didn't think I would have anybody that would actually want it because it was so different. But I had two buyers in one week. The guy who got it was so excited.

And we moved to this other house. It was not in great shape. It

was beautiful outside, but the inside was in need. What I ended up doing was moving forward, not back in time. I ended up doing some of the work myself, and then other people have done stuff, and it ended up being an evolution.

I think my life has been an evolution, it's never a plan. I get to a place where I need something or I want something and then I take up learning how to do it. I also kind of keep everything and sometimes don't let go of past activities. So sometimes my time gets filled with a lot of things I like to do. I tend to take adventures that I've never done before, thinking I can do anything, and then get in the middle of them and go, "Oh, this takes a little more skill." But you can learn anything if you want to work hard, and I'm into working with my hands.



I had a stained glass studio attached to my home and I only did commissioned work and everybody wanted to take something with them, some little thing, and I didn't want to make little things. Because when you're in a studio, you have to kind of pick your direction, because you can fill your time with things you don't really want to do. I really like commissioned work. I like getting to know people, I like looking at their homes, hearing about their homes, and trying to make a piece that fits what they're looking for. I like that as a place to spin off from. I did that for a long time.

But there were still people that weren't happy I didn't have things that could go. So I went, "Ah, ha! I'll start representing other artists in glass only. And then I can do my studio. So I took over my living room, which is a nice room, and made that kind of a home gallery. So we had that for use and people would come in and it was very successful. People loved what I had, but you end up not being in the studio. If you're going to run a successful business, you can't just hand it over, you have to be involved with running it if you want it to be who you are. And

that's kind of what happened.

And I always kept the studio, and I'd be running in and out when I had kids and I kind of liked that multi-tasking—that kind of works for me—that I see that I miss. It was intrusive in the house, because (other) people's vacations were ours. And I put up some stained glass doors, but when people would come in after 10, the kids knew that they couldn't yell at each other and yelling could only commence after 6. And they were great and everyone adapted, but it was a little nuts.

So I was romanced to move out onto Route 100 when Green Mountain Chocolate was there, and Cabot, and I was Shimmering Glass, moving to my first retail space, which was incredibly scary-- my first big adventure in paying rent. And you had to be really strong to make it there, for my kind of thing. But it was fun and exciting and changing a lot, and all very glass oriented. But I came to where I wanted my own spot. I tried to have a studio there and it just didn't work, so I moved it back home. And at the time I had some employees and wasn't getting to the studio at all, but always with intentions of getting back.



A Stowe
Landmark

LOCALLY OWNED

So then I ended up being able to buy the building we're in in Stowe. (Every place) was too this or too that. And I told the realtor "I'm going to drive you crazy." The only place I wanted wasn't for sale. She ended up asking the owner and he must have thought about it. About a year later, when I thought, "Okay, I'm never going to have my own place," she approached me. So we made that little red building happen. And I love that little red building. There is something magical about it. It's just awesome. It has a good energy. It's been craft people owning it forever-- a lot of devoted craft in it. It has the right soul, and I always feel it will always have the right soul. So we did that and grew it. And we were sort of busting at the seams and I was getting involved in all these different things. We opened a store in NH that a manager of our was going to run, but she needed to be in NYC and she was so happy to be in high heels. But I realized that I really didn't want to be in NH. I didn't want to

travel back and forth. So we rented this other building, put my studio downstairs, and decided to make this a design center because at the time I was going into people's homes and helping them with those really special items. Designing pieces of furniture and having it made, and glass, but kind of those little special things. It was a design center, but I wanted to open this building in terms of special art pieces.

That grew and then people said that you had to have fabrics if you want to have a real design center. It wasn't really what I was thinking, but I said, "Okay." So went to find a designer to do that part. After several things decided that I really had to do it. I've certainly had great help throughout the years but then you still have to head it. It's still you.

I am definitely about hand made. I am definitely somebody that wants to have things that are going to last and have history and meaning, some depth to it. I'm not great if someone wants that page out of Crate and Barrel. It looks beautiful, don't get me wrong, but it has no soul. I want to know people deeper and what we can bring in that has more meaning, that's not just what looks good. Not everyone wants to do that. I'm more working for that person and who they are, which makes me eclectic in how I work. And in reflecting me in that it has soul. Authenticity. So it's hard. That's exactly what is happening out there.



And knowing that what I do is not for everybody. I used to be nervous about people visiting my home. Nervous about, okay I don't want somebody to think that they have to live like I do. That seeing my place doesn't mean your place. That your place has to look like mine—I know it's not for everybody. I do know that when I got over that, that's its just me. When people can step outside of themselves and when I work with someone on their home, it doesn't mean I'm going to live like that. It's got nothing to do with that. So what I've found is that it's really

important not to have judgments. And it's not like in life I don't have judgments, because I sure do, but in my work I go right to what has to happen. All the years of doing commission for people has given me that. And sometimes it's more successful than others. I'm working for that person and who they are, making it personal to them. And it's challenging.

It's been a lot of hard work with no exotic vacations every school break, which is okay. Because my house is nice, I don't need to leave it. It's funny because when you make your space really you, you enjoy being in it. It's not just about a house here and a house there. It's about creating environment. It's very interesting. And now for a restaurant or event space or whatever it's going to be.

That's fun to take an old memory place that we went to and had bar mitzvas and ate...Back when I had my first businesses, I was so in my businesses that I never cooked and I would burn frozen pizza. And I was a decent cook, but Ari (her oldest son), after a long day of soccer would just go, "Yuk. I was hoping for something good." I couldn't even get that together, it was so much work and I was so panicked. But then my Dad came to live with us after my Mom passed away, and he needed his dinners. And so I arranged for Carl (Huber) to make him a lunch that he would bring back and he could heat up, so I knew that he was all set. And then everybody would be hanging over his food. So we ended up having Carl make us food,—like a big vat. I would just call and he'd make us lasagna, or soup, you could just name it and he would make it and we'd bring it home. Because we really didn't want to go out to eat, we were so tired. He was a life saver. It was so kind of him. Amazing. And so we sat around and had family dinners that we just picked up and brought home. So we have lots of great memories of Carl and Diane and Tanglewoods.

What most inspires you work?

I think it's the people. I have an interview process so you get to know someone. I'm inspired by the people, if I think they are going to let me in. I do a lot of residential. Residential is very different than commercial. Residential is much more personal, time consuming, much more emotional. You're learning about relationships with the partners/spouses. It's just different. It can be very emotional and emotionally draining. I think when you're connected, when people are trusting and you're clicking and it's just working...I look for those relationships that look like we'll make magic together.



Commercial: I love commercial because I love deadlines. I'm not good with things dragging on. I have to learn for myself that if you don't make a deadline it's not heart transplant. Commercial has deadlines, and fill an area that suits all different kinds of people. That's another adventure, a bit looser in some ways, which I like for that. I like the combination, but it's really about the client. And not keeping situations that aren't right for you.

The commercial project at Tanglewoods is fun because they don't know exactly what the spaces are going to be so they have to be flexible. And also it is our family, so it's important to me that it have elements of creativity, craft, and who I am, and who they have been brought up to be. Even though commercially, and money conscious-wise, Ari is really trying to keep it on budget and all that. But there are things that I feel like, and we are, and the materials only cost \$2, but the labor costs a million dollars. There are elements that are a little more than some others you might find, but I think it's really worth it in the long run. It will have staying power. I don't like re-dos.

Do you have any artistic heroes or people in your life that have rocked your world in terms of your creative life?

No. I was always into art. I came from more of a business family. I always loved to work with my hands and was always

happiest when I was. It wasn't discouraged, but it wasn't encouraged. Not in terms of family. My Dad had a small department store in NH. I used to do the windows—he didn't really care. And I wasn't allowed to really work for money. But I loved to work. And then I remember an aunt say to me when I was really young, "Oh, you really like to work with your hands!" And I took it as an insult at the time. "Is she saying that I'm not intellectual, or smart, or something?" At that time I didn't know how to take that. I was little. But I just loved to make stuff and I entered contests, poster contest and things. But never really had any formal art training. Later on started to have a little bit, but I couldn't take the structure. It took me a long time to be able to tolerate structure and incorporate it back into that sort of spontaneous person I was. I always thought for myself. There was somebody I learned glass from, but it was very traditional and technical. And I had to leave there when I was going off on my own because I didn't want to hear that I couldn't do it my way. So I usually just leave when I learn something and make it my own way. I think it's always kind of been like that. Now that I think of what you ask, I think of something that was influential, but it's not...I have a sister who is 12 years older than me, and when I was a teenager, I used to go to NYC (and visit her). I would hop on the Greyhound bus and you could do that. Bring a friend or not. I would walk around the city up and down Madison Avenue and in and out of stores. It wasn't about buying things—we had a department store. I didn't have a big thing about owning things. It was more about seeing things. My Dad actually used to let me buy for his store. Which I forgot. He used to take me to New York and he would buy conservative (things). He started his store out of a truck and delivered things that people needed and he would let them buy things on time. And it grew into a little store, which grew into a bigger store...

That sounds like a big influence, watching that evolve. You seem to be mirroring your Dad's entrepreneurial spirit in a way. I imagine that it must have been a real imprint.

Yeah, I guess. I wouldn't have thought that because we were so protected from it. Not be involved in the grind.

But to be involved in the buying trips...that's the fun stuff, and the stuff that you've translated into your own career, it seems...?

Yeah, I remember bringing these leather gaucho pants to Claremont NH. And then being in there working with people. I couldn't get paid to sell, but I loved to sell. I would be getting these people who were pretty conservative to be putting these

long skirts on. They looked great, but it was a big push for them. Yeah, I guess I never really thought of that. It was really fun in that way.



And then going to NY all the time. The stores were so much fun. There would be a button store—the whole store would be buttons. Then there would be a bikini store...everything was so concentrated and so cool. I would walk until my legs couldn't go any more. I just loved doing that. And I don't see that anymore. And your downtowns don't have their individual stores anymore. But young people in Stowe are venturing into more retail these days, and restaurants are really big. So people are putting more effort into what they're creating. It makes me feel old, but I'm still in it! It's a lot of work. But I've been lucky. I've always pursued what I wanted, and I've taught my kids to do that. Everyone has those big things that happen, but if you are true to who you are, things will work out.

What activities do you enjoy outside of your artistic life?

My grandchildren of course! I ski, I golf, and I go to exercise with Becky Widschwenter from Waterbury Center. It's great, it's a young group, and I'm learning how to run. I'm not giving it up although a lot of other older people that I know say "you shouldn't be running! You shouldn't be running!" But I'm finding out all sorts of things about my body and I really like it! I used to

walk a lot. I like city walking. I walk so fast that I'm passing everyone. I felt like I could walk to the White Mountains. Here it's a different story. But one of the issues is retail is open 10-6, so there's not a ton of time. I'd love to entertain more, but I just don't have the time. We do like to go away on off-season, some place where we just sort of stay. We don't mind repeats and I like simple—I like to feel where I am. I really like golf, it's a sensitive game which is not like most of my life. It shows me what space I'm in now, and it's weirdly enjoyable. Being able to be really okay with a really off day. Who knew?

What are you reading right now?

I'm not reading too much right now. The New Yorker. Those little articles. And I'm embarrassed to say I'm a little obsessed with the news channels. I do have a habit—I'm trying to break the habit—but I do have the habit of watching "Law & Order." And when I read, it's hard, I just read all the time.

What is next for you?

I don't know. I'm trying to keep what I do and find more freedom. That's my thing.