

Doggone Dede

*That "crazy chick who paints the flamingos"
turns to a safer medium, but
her message is no less unconventional.*

The name Dede LaRue sounds like some red-headed bubble dancer in a '40s burlesque show. And, in fact, there *is* something showbiz and glitzy about the animal sculptures this Denver artist makes out of paper mache, paint, and plastic flowers. Her dogs, cats, horses, deer, and other creatures would make a spectacular performing-animal act

LaRue loves and respects animals — especially dogs — and says she can relate to them better than human beings. "Animals are so wonderful and loving, so forgiving," she says. "There's an honesty about them. Even when a dog bites, there's always an understandable reason. Unlike people:"

LaRue expresses her special relationship with animals through the surprising, beautiful, and humorous artworks she makes in her Edgewater studio. Some of LaRue's skillfully constructed life-size sculptures of pets and wild animals are more fanciful than forceful. For example, on the ocean-blue glossy coat of LaRue's collie-sized circus horse, pinto patches are decorated to resemble continents, making

the horse symbolic of the earth itself. Or how about the mounted trophy-head of a coyote, based on a taxidermy form LaRue covered with delicately shaded blue plastic flowers. LaRue transforms this wild-animal stereotype into a magically furry fantasy with "real" glass eyes.

Thanks to pieces like these, LaRue's popularity has grown to the point where she can hardly keep up with demand. But LaRue cherishes a mischievous preference for the harder-edged satirical works that have peppered her career with controversy.

"Of course I'm going to take advantage of every opportunity to shock and inflame people — that's what artists do," says LaRue.

Most recently her "Nicole Simpson's Dog" aroused comment with its portrayal of the famous Akita, complete with bloody paws, guarding a suspicious black leather glove. Another piece, "Sparky's Depressed," (shown at left) shows a mixed-breed mutt sitting up and begging — while gulping Prozac and holding a toy gun to its head. The humor behind these works is dark and slashing, an effect buttressed by LaRue's deft and realistic draftsmanship.

By Hart Hill

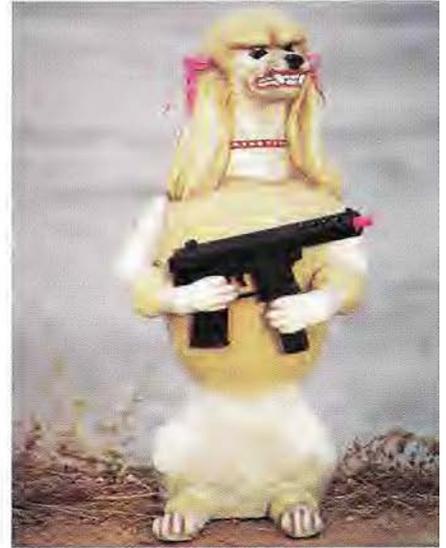




"Sister Mary Spot"



"Fat Dog with Red Frisbee"



"Poodle of Fortune"

LaRue's first brush with notoriety came in 1986, when she turned her back on the small, safe, ceramic sculptures she'd been making and took up a more daring medium — spray-painting animals on trash dumpsters. Playful attempts at performance art, LaRue's cartoonish graffiti sketches of Chinese zodiac animals, flamingos, doves, and dinosaurs appeared anonymously around Capitol Hill and other downtown neighborhoods, long before graffiti became a sinister trend in Denver.

At first LaRue's mysterious but cheerful trash-art was greeted by Denverites as an amusing oddity; some even thought the paintings perked up and beautified the ugly dumpsters. But later on, when gang-based graffiti and vandalism by youthful "taggers" finally swept through Denver, the public perception of LaRue's clandestine acts of art changed overnight from the antics of a harmless eccentric to illegal acts of criminal intent.

At one point *Westword* claimed that there was a \$2,000 crime-stopper's reward for me, at the same time a \$1,500 reward was being offered for a murderer. I used to go incognito to the neighborhood anti-graffiti meetings and check out all the angry citizens who were complaining about the 'crazy chick who paints the flamingos: It was pretty amazing.'

Far from crazy or felonious, LaRue's intent was to merely question the definitions and boundaries of art. "What is good? What is bad?" she says. "I won-

dered if people's ideas about a thing could be changed through art, if graffiti could be used to accomplish that. I wanted it to be fun and inoffensive. I had no idea it would be picked up by the media and become so controversial. But I loved it!" LaRue laughs.

Still, LaRue says she'd think twice about repeating her dumpster stunts in today's more dangerous urban environment. "I don't think I'd be safe doing such a risky thing now — Denver has changed so much, the nature of the act is too exposed and outrageous."

Despite her taste for controversy, tacky jokes, and plastic flowers, Dede LaRue is serious. She stands on the brink of commercial success while steadfastly refusing to make art strictly in order to sell it. Nevertheless, she won best of show in

the 3D mixed media category at this year's Cherry Creek Art Festival. To ensure she can make art free of financial necessity, LaRue insists on keeping her "day job" as a dog groomer in a tony neighborhood near the Denver Tech Center.

"I like having a job that pays my expenses. That way I don't have to tone down the content of my art to get sold or accepted. I've gotten to the point now where I could almost quit and just live off my art. But I don't think I will — I don't want to spend the rest of my life cranking out papier mache unicorns."

Things weren't always so rosy for LaRue. She remembers growing up in Boulder in a dysfunctional family, and a youth filled with alcoholism, drug abuse, and amnesia. For a while, she lived

out of her car. Recovery and maturity have brought LaRue a more stable life, a house she's buying with one of the Motherfollers, and a growing reputation as an artist. LaRue continues to be upbeat and curious.

"I didn't choose to be an artist. It just sort of happened. But somehow, through it all, I managed to produce art anyway. Obviously, something's going on that's beyond me, whether it's the goddess or what, I don't know. I just know that I love it when the process of art takes control, and it's not really me doing it, but the piece becoming itself. It's like a miracle."

Hart Hill is an artist and freelance writer from Denver.



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Photo: Linda Henselmann