

WELDING A VISION



Kate and *Looking Aft*. "Lee and I are both science fiction nerds and it seems to seep into the photo sessions." Photo: Lee Orr

Kate Tupper's shipbuilding skills take flight through sculpture

by Galadriel Watson

From crafting to making costumes, Kate Tupper has always been prolifically creative. Her earliest memory is of "making stuff. I'd drive my mother crazy. I took her scissors all the time," she says.

These days, Tupper's tools still include scissors, but the 36-year-old's art has also evolved to require some heavier equipment. The latest is a TIG (Tungsten Inert Gas) welder, which she had to teach herself to use. And while she still has fun shaping fabric, she has become best known for her metal sculptures.

The most widely known is perhaps *All Strings Attached*, which featured at Castlegar's Sculpturewalk in summer 2016, won third place for artistic merit and will be installed in downtown Nelson for a year. Tupper describes the sculpture as "a whirling seed pod; a glistening crustacean." Thanks to hand-painted layers of automotive paint mixed with colour-shifting chameleon pigments, the ethereal piece shimmers as it spins, luminescent, as if butterflies are taking off.

For 2017's walk, another creation takes form on Tupper's workshop table, vaguely resembling a cocoon. After shaping flat sheets and cold-bending metal rods, Tupper precisely welds them together. "When I build it, it's all geometrically perfect and every layer interacts with the other layers. It can't even be off by a millimeter. When it's got so much detail, it has to be perfect or it looks like a mess."

Tupper's many other projects include a "speed of light" bike that took 500 hours to complete, small shell-like objects and a bicycle rack. These and more are commissioned, featured in galleries, sold

at places like Nelson's Craft Connection, donated as public art or displayed in Tupper's own home.

It's a far cry from how Tupper first used her welding skills, as a commercial welder. Born, raised and still living in Nakusp, Tupper was introduced to the trade in mandatory shop class in Grade 8 and hated it. "It was dirty, loud, stupid and wrecked my outfits," she says. But slowly she started seeing the possibilities.

In 2004, wanting to remain in Nakusp but needing to support two young sons, she completed the level C welding program at Selkirk College in Nelson. Back in Nakusp she worked for a construction company, and at lunchtimes experimented with sculpture. She was then hired to help build the new M.V. *Columbia* ferry for Upper Arrow Lake. While she learned the basics of welding at college, it's these experiences and her coworkers that helped her develop her true skills.

These days, Tupper still does the occasional commercial work but is concentrating on her art. One of her projects actually bridges the two. Once completed, *Looking Aft*, partially funded by Columbia Basin Trust and the Columbia Kootenay Cultural Alliance, will hang from the wall under the *Columbia's* wheelhouse. The woven steel strips represent the patterns Tupper saw while helping construct the ship, from gussets to girders—the structural elements hidden beneath the ferry's huge flat deck.

To start, she designed the sculpture on paper. She then transferred the idea to computer, and sent the file away to get a 4-by-8-foot sheet of steel laser-cut. It's since been her task to shape, weave and connect the strips, using the TIG welder. "It's pretty crazy to build a ship and then you get to build a sculpture for it," she says.

Looking Aft also ties to another part of Tupper's artistic life: running "art teams." When a funder for the sculptor backed out, Tupper

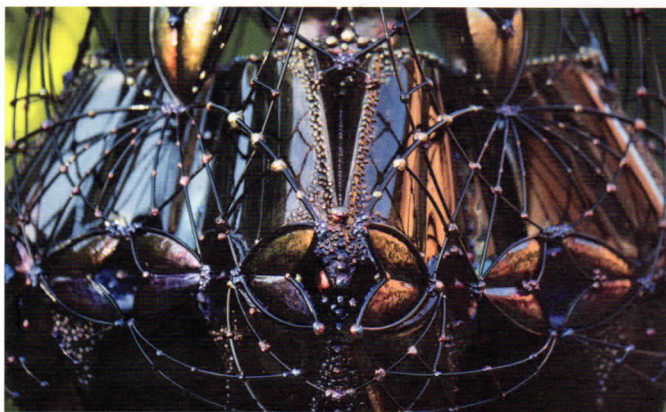
needed another source of money. The solution that sprang to life was Art Party, a biannual event that draws people to Nakusp's Old Firehall to view art, buy art, be immersed in art—both visual and performing—and have fun.

As lead organizer, Tupper has been amazed by the response. The first event in April 2016 drew about 160 people and raised the money needed for *Looking Aft*. The second event in November 2016 drew almost 400 people and raised money for two public murals in the village. For the next event, in May 2017, Tupper and her team are planning for 600 attendees.

Not only does the event raise funds for specific projects and give locals excitement but it's helping put Nakusp on the artistic map. So far, performers and partiers are travelling from communities like Revelstoke and Nelson, contributing to Nakusp's economy during the off-season. Plus the team is starting to pool funds, which it may then be able to grant to future art projects.

In the same vein, Tupper also heads the Farm Decor Team at the annual Shambhala Music Festival in Salmo. There she runs a group of artists and tradespeople from around the world who design art projects for the site. Having attended the festival for 12 years straight, and being wowed by the art installations, this is one of Tupper's dream roles.

And dreaming is how Tupper starts. In her home workshop—separate from her off-site welding workshop—one wall is pinned with pieces of paper stating her goals. She's shocked how many have come true. "I don't know if it's luck or if I'm prepared and I jump on the opportunities," she says.



All Strings Attached. "This is my Sculpturewalk entry headed to Nelson in the spring."
Photo: Lee Orr

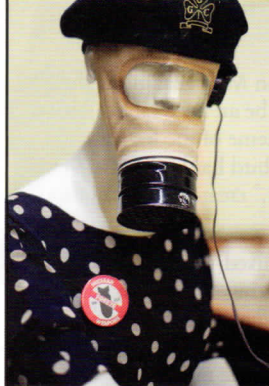
The workshop is also a jumble of supplies. Surprisingly, Tupper often begins the process of considering her next sculpture by making costumes. In this way, she explores ideas and colour. She builds a "bazillion" options on paper. She's currently playing with casting resin, since her next sculpture—funded by a BC Arts Council grant—will include resin windows. "I get to make fun experiments," she says. "I get to have a budget for glitter. This is my life. It's amazing!"

In fact, Tupper overflows with gratefulness. "I have so much gratitude that I'm getting paid to make art; it's not just costing me money. So much gratitude I get to build public sculpture. Gratitude that my community is super supportive. Plus my mother has been my main supporter for my entire life, raising me, helping raise my children and encouraging my welding and artistic practice. For the last couple of weeks I've been weeping at the shop with gratitude."

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