

# POST

THIS IS ROCHESTER.



## NATURE REMIX

Inside Susan Pullman  
Brooks' art and home



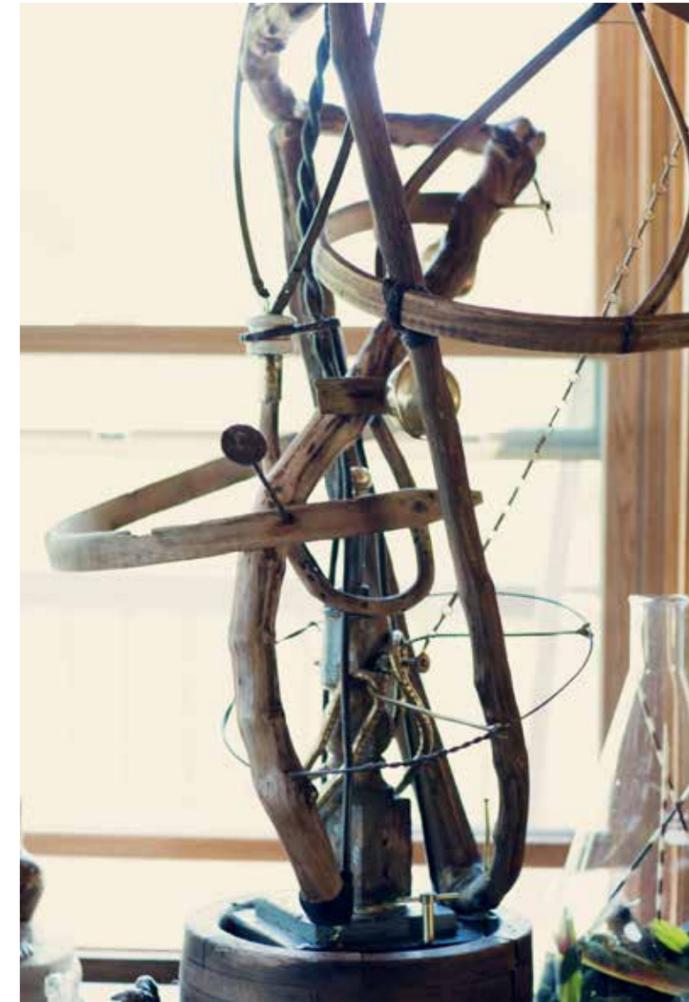
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Susan Pullman Brooks spins sculptures out of wood, bones, rocks, shells, metal scraps—anything she can get her curious hands on. The result is entrancing towers of grit and grace.



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BY JENNIFER PALUMBO | PHOTOGRAPHS BY HANNAH BETTS

# “ THIS IS MY ART AND IT IS DANGEROUS. ”

Susan Pullman Brooks laughs as she quotes Catherine O’Hara’s line from “Beetlejuice.” It’s on her business card, along with an image of her bleeding fingers grasping old metal objects from one of her sculptures. They come from her collection of hundreds of items amassed by foraging through the ravines near her home and in her travels.

Brooks’ sculptures aren’t made with conventional artistic mediums. Any given piece could be made with fox vertebrae, snapping-turtle bones, a lightning rod, an old scythe, an old walking stick, all arranged and connected to form an artistic interpretation of Hindu or Norse mythology, or symbols of astronomy and science.

To a person familiar with the mythology or story behind a piece, her interpretations shine through in the unusual objects and the way she connects them. To an untrained eye, they’re fascinating works of art, beautiful and thought-provoking.

Born and raised on Long Island, Brooks was immersed in art at an early age.

“My mother recognized some pretty good talent in me, and I started going to pretty serious art classes when I was 5,” Brooks says. “I’ve always, all my life, been creative, and my mother nurtured that in me.”

After schooling at the Huntington Fine Arts, attending college at the Philadelphia College of Art with a degree in painting was an obvious next step. While she had the talent for it, Brooks knew early on that painting wasn’t her true calling.

“I had this beautiful studio when I was a student at the Philadelphia College of Art. I shared it with two other women. I would watch them, and they would be in there all night, happy, not eating, not wanting to leave. And I was so envious, because I just wasn’t like that. My work was more immediate,” Brooks says.

“My parents would call me ‘my daughter the painter,’ they had expectations of me being a painter. They spent thousands of dollars on art school. For years after I graduated, they would ask if I was painting,” she says.

“I was interested, but I wasn’t passionate about it.”

It would be years before Brooks found her passion. And like the arrangements of seemingly unrelated objects in her sculptures, inspiration came from unlikely places.

The first was on a walk in a snowstorm while living in New Hope, Penn. Brooks came across the skull of a black bear in the snow.

“This is what started the whole thing—this is what changed my life,” Brooks says. “It’s such a weird thing.”

Brooks unearthed a nearly complete skeleton, which she reassembled on her dining room table. The collecting of bones led to finding other things in the woods, creating a collection of found objects that would later be used for her unique sculptures.

Another trigger came while watching the television show “The Vikings.” Scenes featuring garlands of bones and driftwood gave Brooks an epiphany.





“It’s almost like an obsession. It all has to do with balance. I have to counterbalance and figure out what’s going on; that’s a level that I wasn’t aware of. I love to put things together. I’m the girl you want to be with when the elevator breaks down.”

Much of her work is based on the Hindu pantheon of gods. As a yoga instructor in New Hope, Brooks studied Hinduism and traveled to India. The philosophy of the pantheon speaks to our own human experience, she says.

“There are so many Hindu gods, 330 million. There’s a message in that: There is really no one god,” Brooks says.

“In a lot of Hindu temples, there is a mirror above the deity. And the mirror is there to remind you that you are every character in the story. A lot of the Hindu mythologies are just to remind you of your capacity. Everything, all of these stories are just reflections of us. That’s one of the things that attracted me to it.”

Her studies led her to her husband, Douglas Brooks, a professor of religion at the University of Rochester, renowned for his scholastic work in Hinduism. The two met at one of Douglas’ speaking engagements.

“It was like this: There were probably 200 people in the room. Douglas was up front and he was talking. I tried to look at him, and I could not look at him,” she recalls. “It was the first time that had ever happened to me. It was like something electrical.”

Brooks relocated from her artist community in New Hope to Rochester four years ago.

“I was very nervous about that, because ... it’s Upstate New York. I was terrified,” she recalls. “Where I live now, it really is ... I landed in heaven. It’s really wonderful.”

The view from their Bloomfield home truly is heavenly. Farmland, woods, ponds, and rolling hills in the distance are a perfect backdrop for Brooks’ work.

It’s also perfect for scavenging for objects to add to her collection. Brooks explains that many of the ravines around her home were once used to dump old farm equipment and other junk. In a week, she can spend up to 20 hours searching and digging through those ravines

“Something clicked, and I knew what I was supposed to do,” she recalls.

“How lucky am I? I wanted to fill that space, that painful space. I guess I really wanted to validate that I was an artist, because I felt like a fraud, being able to paint but not really wanting to,” she says.

“I became OK with myself then. I became OK with being myself, with being by myself, with being myself with other people.”

Brooks has a deep fascination with orreries, mechanical models of the solar system. Their construction is an appealing challenge to Brooks, as her pieces aren’t welded. They’re often knotted together and rely on balance and gravity, she explains.





and in the woods; it's crucial to her work.

Her basement studio is full of her findings—arranged by metal type, wood, glass and bones. Hundreds of bones. Brooks is still deeply invested in bones. The couple even received them as wedding presents from friends.

Inside, their log cabin home is adorned with their many collections, a puja altar, and Brooks' artwork. A chalkboard wall is adorned with drawings and various quotes, "Douglasisms," Brooks says.

"The first thing that happens when people come into the house is ... they don't know where to look first," she says.

Anything not nailed down is up for grabs for Brooks to use as an object in a piece, or for her to rearrange, which she does on a regular basis to satisfy her self-diagnosed attention-deficit disorder. "When something feels off, it can't be OK until something feels right," she says. "This happens in the house every single day. The whole house is a canvas for me. Every single day, stuff moves."

Living with an artist is "like living in the eye of a hurricane," Douglas says. "Have you seen this house? It's like being in the eye of a beautiful hurricane."

The two always discuss a piece when Brooks is either commissioned or searching for clarification on an idea of her own. In order to create a sculpture to represent a god or goddess in either the Hindu or Norse pantheon, you need to understand the narrative, Brooks explains.

"Douglas is the guy for understanding all things Hindu mythology," she says. "He clarifies a lot of what is just floating around in my mind. If I have an idea, we'll talk about it and I'll tell him what I'm thinking, and he'll give me the story."

But while Brooks uses the narrative as inspiration to create and evolve her pieces, a person doesn't need to understand that narrative to enjoy the work.

"This is an entirely new, fractured, artistic sensibility applied to the mythology. It's in no way a direct interpretation, and I think that's part of its beauty and its credibility," Douglas says. "It taps into those deeper places in the

soul," he says "You don't have to know what it means; it just does something to you. What makes it interesting art to me is that you have a different reaction to it every time you see it. And that's what the stories do. They're supposed to be evocative, not just narrative."

The response to her work has been overwhelmingly positive. After accumulating 15 pieces, she reached out to her network to announce that they were for sale. Within days, nearly all were sold, and Brooks had a few commissions for new sculptures as well. She's currently exhibiting four pieces at Michele Varian in SoHo, New York City.

"Susan is not really normal, in the sense that she has a far greater exposure and a greater grasp [of the mythology]," Douglas says. "She knows a lot about it and spends time learning, and then we'll have a conversation. She has a mad-scientist quality, so I don't really get in the way."

Like when she was commissioned to create a sculpture representing the Hindu goddess Durga, whose many hands hold weapons representing different meanings.

"Durga is as wild and bloody as you can get," Brooks says. To interpret this narrative, many sharp objects protrude from the sculpture's weathered wooden base, mimicking the goddess' arms and her weapons. Durga lived up to her name, as Brooks cut herself open several times while creating the piece, bleeding all over it.

This is her art and it is dangerous. **L**



*A towering example of Brooks' art.*