

more than a doll

by scott naugle

PHOTO COURTESY OF ELLEN ELLIS LEE



Standing proudly on the table in Ellen Lee's workspace is a new creation named Mazaza, the manager of fictitious "Cozy Crab Cove." About a foot tall, this doll is nearly complete. Ruffles and flourishes flow from her dress, wrap, and hat. Zigzagging lines move vertically in black and taupe, while soft blue lace floats alongside the skirt. Countless strands of white and gold necklaces drape her neck. Mazaza has five hidden hearts for her owner to discover. The beadwork is meticulous. Her clear face exudes a firm glow and she shares the inkling of a smile across her sapphire lips. All of this intermingles, allowing the impression of a personality and that this wise lady is about to speak, firmly, refined and intelligent. She's alive and has a story.

"All of my figurative sculptures are named, have stories, and state the number of hearts that can be found in various places. The idea is to create for the observer an additional interaction with each piece," says Lee.

Lee's own story began in Mississippi. She grew up in Laurel and attended the historic Oak Park High School. "My father, Leander Theodore Ellis, was the principal and my mother Regina was a teacher. I was constantly under their watch and could not get away with anything," laughs Lee. She later attended Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia. From there she went on to a 40-year career in wardrobe and costume design in New York City. Lee worked

on dozens of Broadway shows including eight years of handling wardrobe for the television show *Saturday Night Live*. In 2003, retirement brought her back to Mississippi and Ocean Springs for a new venture: creating dolls.

Creating dolls is intricate and close work, and only two or three may be produced in a month. It is not uncommon for Lee to lose track of time, working through the night, totally given over to the doll at hand. "I promised my doctor I would not do this anymore and sleep regularly," whispers Lee as she laughs.

The fabrics comprising the doll's garments are gifts or are from thrift stores. A sister-in-law in New York City occasionally sends wardrobe remnants from shows recently closed. "These gifts send me in other directions," Lee notes.

"I like people to see depth and detail," explains Lee. "And I want folks to relax about colors we've been told don't go together."

Turning to Mazaza, Lee explains: "This particular doll runs Cozy Crab Cove. There are boudoirs all over." A close inspection reveals several white seashells cast from air-drying clay, each sewn into the dress, offering crabs a safe harbor. The Cozy Crab Cove is a five-star cove for molting crabs, boasting an open door policy. "The rooms book up fast," Lee adds. The nuanced significance of Mazaza's attire and story is that crabs and other undersea

life need safe homes versus refuse carelessly tossed in our waterways. "My desire is to be playful as I say things through my work, not hit people with a hammer across the head," states Lee.

One derives many impressions from any one of Lee's dolls. Through the eye, the intellect is overwhelmed. The innovative blending of hues in the dress and hat stimulate reconsideration—a mental recalibration of how colors interact. Norms are set aside and visual expectations are reset, while a quick and cursory glance is impossible. The textures of the lace, burlap, and polyester, among others, also skew the expected—revealing the variety of experiences and outcomes in life—the unevenness, the troubles, and the joy. As we survive, layers and additions to a personal quilt accumulate. It is also so with the protector of Cozy Crab Cove.

Inspiration for the dolls comes to Lee in different ways, "I may see an image for a doll first or I may go with whatever pops up. It works both ways. I usually have no stipulations."

Lee displays and sells her work through the Ocean Springs Art House and also at Negrotto's Gallery in Biloxi.

Pausing for a moment, while looking at two or three dolls in various states of completion, Lee softly remarks, "They're gentle...and powerful." They're also beautiful.

Ellen Ellis Lee | 1203 Nelson Avenue | Ocean Springs | 228.872.1485 | www.osarthouse.org