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Whimsy in stone

Sculptor crafts following with unique Rocknoggins

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Until recently, Dawn Sorrell was quite the rolling stone. Now, after traversing two continents and at least that many art forms, she's found her spot among the rocks in Sumner.

These are not just any rocks. They're big stones with personalities - and though carved by a seasoned sculptor, they're not "serious art." That's because Sorrell, 38, has gotten over herself as an artist.

She calls her sculptures Rocknoggins, and she doesn't care what the critics say. Sorrell studied art on a scholarship to Cottey College in Nevada, Mo., and at the University of Colorado; she's exhibited her work in museums from Tokyo to Colorado Springs. But the pursuit of prestige is behind her.

Sorrell's goal is to crack people up.

She's getting there, more every day, by tackling hunks of granite and other hard rock she finds on mountain hikes, or receives as gifts from neighbors.

Sorrell's small garden - and growing numbers of other gardens and ponds around the Northwest - is home to a family of European-inspired characters:

Guido, the Brit, Pierre and her favorite, Cletus.

Cletus was named after and inspired by Sorrell's grandfather, who "had a big, Irish belly laugh," as does this Rocknoggin. Sorrell is happy to show visitors how to interact with Cletus: You can make him merely smile, or move his jaw to widen into a guffaw.



In other stones, she sees other faces. Her first Rocknoggin, Tikimon, is an Asianesque guy who wears a perplexed expression.

"I get that look from people a lot," Sorrell says. It's the one that says, "Hmm, very nice, Dawn. Cute, but it's not art."

Sorrell's having too much fun to worry about such assessments. She's also too busy making more Rocknoggins to meet buyers' demands. Sumner's Garden Market, an elegant shop up the street from her home, is the first gallery to display the stones.

"I haven't seen anything else like them," says Anne VanLierop, co-owner of the Garden Market. When a Rocknoggin looks up at you, she adds, "you instantly smile."

When Sorrell met VanLierop last spring, it was at the start of her own new season of artistic endeavor. Before moving to Washington, she and her then-husband ran a graphic design company in Pinecliffe, Colo., a small community 11 miles from Boulder. Successful in business but unhappy otherwise, they divorced last year, and Sorrell went in search of a place to start over. This place, ideally, would be near the mountains and near the sea. It would be somewhere she could afford art studio space as well as a place to live. Room to sculpt was a high priority, and something she'd pushed back for too long. After college, Sorrell painted, but she found her voice in sculpture when she moved to Kobe, Japan, in 1991 for her husband's job with Procter & Gamble.

"Hallelujah, this is it," she thought as she began creating sculptures. "I remember sitting in my studio, with debris and plaster all around me. I was just in bliss."

In 1995, the Kobe earthquake destroyed much of Sorrell's work. She and her husband moved to Pinecliffe to establish their commercial-art firm. When the marriage ended eight years later, Sorrell decided to make the transition - to a new community and a new art form - complete.

Puget Sound beckoned, with its water, mountains and art community; Seattle looked good, but she couldn't touch anything there due to the city's steep housing prices. So Sorrell searched farther and farther away from the city, until she came upon the perfect pair of structures on a sleepy street in Sumner.

Most important, for Sorrell's purposes, was the bigger building in the back yard.

"I've always wanted a barn," she says. She couldn't think of a better place to sculpt, except maybe a warehouse in New York. At 850 square feet, her barn affords her plenty of space to follow her bliss.

But when Sorrell moved in last September, she faced a long, dark winter - compared with Colorado's relatively sunny one - and the gaping unknown that was her future.

"I'd just bought this house, and just put everything I had into being a sculptor," she recalls. "The pressure was on to be commercial, to create a masterpiece, make money, make a name for myself." Months passed as she got her bearings.

Then, one day, Sorrell tried carving a rock. Something happened.

"I thought, 'Wow, this is fun,'" to simply define the face she'd already seen in the rock's shape. The more she looked at the stone, the clearer its face became. "I started going in and defining the features that I saw. It was very liberating."

A neighbor, Jerry Reis, saw Sorrell out in the barn with her pneumatic die grinder, safety mask and respirator. Soon, he was bringing her rocks, and after they all became noggins, he joked that her yard was starting to resemble a mini Easter Island, with its giant moai monuments of volcanic rock.

In March, Sorrell decided it was time to spread the noggins around.

Her partner, Hal Warren, runs a company called Peak Media, so he created a Web site, www.rocknoggins.com, to show all of the stones. In June, at the same time that the Garden Market began selling the noggins, organizers of local garden tours featured them, and orders started coming in. BKB & Co., a Tacoma gallery, invited Sorrell to do a show in September.

"I'm overwhelmed with what's happening," she says softly. "I'm ecstatic."

She's also busy making casts, priced from \$190, of her originals, which can go as high as \$1,000. First, however, she had to learn how to make molds.

She phoned Tacoma sculptor Lynn Di Nino, who "gave me advice, with no hesitation. She told me, step by step, how to do it."

Di Nino is a fan of Sorrell's work, though she acknowledges that art critics might turn up their noses. Let them, Di Nino says; she figures Rocknoggin whimsy will develop a following regardless.

"One look at her work and your spirits are lifted," Di Nino says. "The humor in her work makes a nice counterpoint to the garden setting: a nice surprise as you round the bend."

Go ahead and laugh at the noggins, Sorrell adds, and feel free to touch their smooth foreheads.

"If somebody lights up, and responds," to a noggin's expression, "it's so rewarding. And that happens all the time."

The artist's leap into the unknown, then, landed her in what turned out to be the right places: mountain trails, a barn next to a sympathetic neighbor, a garden path.

"I don't have to go through life thinking, 'It might have been' anymore,"

Sorrell says. "I'm not after success or fame. I'm making a living. I'm living my dream."

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