



Caye

THE ART OF THE SOUL COIN



Carol Woolsey who is also known as Caye leads the way through dim hallways in a rambling building she and Lewistown locals call “The Shop.” Through a worn door we enter her studio, Caye Fine Art In Metal. It is here where she parlays the designs she imagines into jewelry and other fine, functional art.

In this windowless space, Caye’s long blonde hair, blue eyes and exuberance for her work brighten the whitewashed cinder block walls and the concrete floor more than fluorescent lighting. Along the workbench are objects in various stages of completion fashioned from either silver or gold. A ring, a bracelet, a flask, a wine stopper and a chalice wait for their finished forms and ennobling gems or mineral stones. Many of the gleaming, sparkling stones Caye herself has cut, shaped and polished. After the pieces are finished, she’ll invest hours buffing each by hand to a lustrous shine.

Her years growing up on a central Montana ranch cultivated an inquisitive girl who wandered the hills and prairie looking at wildflowers, leaves and rocks. Now her appreciation for the outdoors influences her work. “Sometimes I find a design in the color or shape of a stone,” Caye says. “My ideas can come from patterns or textures I see in nature.”

She reaches for an exquisite necklace to illustrate her point. Her expression and the inflection in her voice convey enthusiasm for the design and the pear-shaped center stone, a Koroit opal. Veins of crystal and iridescent colors—green, red and copper—enliven the gem. Small but radiant emeralds, blue sapphires and pieces of 14K gold soldered onto the necklace chain’s oblong links of silver enrich the opal’s fire.

The “Soul Coin” is Caye’s signature piece. Each 14K gold or silver pendant replicating a coin features a “soul stone,” perhaps a birthstone, a diamond, or Yogo sapphire. Some coins display her signature leaves that she describes as “graceful and flowing.” Other

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coins feature chunks of gold. “My inspiration for the Soul Coins are amulets and talismans,” she explains. “I wanted to create something you couldn’t live without, something you might find in the dirt that has the worn look of antiquity. I have clients who believe their coins protect them and say they never take them off. It’s a compliment that gives me goose bumps.”

When asked about influences beyond rocks, leaves and amulets, Caye names Cliff Huggins. When he closed his metal smithing shop in the late 1980s, he gifted his tools to her. These spurred her passion to design jewelry. As for the flasks Caye crafts from silver, she credits the gritty, hard drinking, card-playing cowboys she knew as a girl. She grins while describing the men and explaining how they instilled in her a love for cowboys and Western traditions. Fittingly, the first relief decoration Caye ever featured on a flask was a cowboy crafted from silver.

The disparate reliefs Caye displays on assorted flasks demonstrate her artistic ability. Consider the whimsical character born of silver but not entirely pieced together, resting on the workbench. She calls him “little, scruffy, fat guy.” When little scruffy fat guy becomes a flask, he’ll sport blue sapphire eyes, ruby cufflinks, black diamond and tourmaline buttons on his vest. Conversely, the diamondback rattlesnake draped across a completed flask is a dramatic, jaw-dropping design that artfully captures the serpent’s menacing essence. Within the rattler’s gaping mouth, she’s set a large Mabe pearl. Of course, diamonds and diamond-shaped pieces of gold adorn the snake’s back. A yellow citrine crowns the flask cap.

Caye has designed jewelry for 30 years, but only in the last five has found the freedom to give so much of herself to her passion. She’s established a thriving business. She’s out there marketing her work and teaching metal smithing. Her Open Houses draw new and repeat customers and she often helps husbands select jewelry or flasks for their wives. Each flask, Soul Coin and necklace is a thought rendered into ornamented designs and represent hours of intricate, meticulous metal smithing and craftsmanship. “At times my life became too full or complicated and I had to put jewelry aside,” Caye says. “But I always came back to it. To be successful, I’ve had to persevere, plug away at it and encourage myself. I have to sell my work so I can eat and pay the mortgage, but transforming the look of hard, cold metal and stone into an appealing piece of jewelry will always be more satisfying to me than selling it.”

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