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Crafting nature out of clay and glass A Chester Springs artist will debut her bird series at a show next week.

Mary Anne Janco INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

To have some fun in a sculpture class that was proving to be a bit frustrating, Markels Lorini walked in one day and created a big, fat diving cat.

With its front paws together, its tail flying behind, and a smile on its face, that cat embodies the carefree, playful spirit that is evident in many of Lorini's creations.

The diving cat, Lorini said, symbolizes spontaneity, diving right into things, which is the way Lorini tackles life and her art - be it a project in clay or glass.

For the show that opens next Sunday at Salon des Amis Gallery in Malvern, Lorini has created a series of clay birds, including a cockatoo and a parrot, which are brightly colored and which she hopes will lift people's spirits in these troubled times, she said.

"Making the birds is comforting to me," she said. "It's about our spirits rising above this."

Working in her contemporary Diving Cat Studio, which is nestled in the woods in Chester Springs, she is surrounded by animals and the beauty of nature. Birds, leaves and cats often find their way into her work. "I've always done pottery and taught it," Lorini said. "Glass is new within the last five years."

So on a recent Friday, as two students worked on projects in the clay studio, Lorini headed to the table, where she fired up a torch and started making glass beads.

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She studies with glass artists whose work she admires, and has taken a series of workshops in Murano, Italy, including lessons with glass sculptor Lucio Bubacco.

To create the beads, she takes a glass rod and melts it, twirling it expertly in the flame until a tiny ball of glass emerges. Then she melts in another glass rod for color, and another, demonstrating how tiny dots of green can be pulled into tiny leaves in a bead.

For some of the beads, she creates tiny fish, cats or faces. "Clay was my first love," she said, but there is no greater challenge than working with molten glass.

Seventy percent of her work is custom work, she said. One of her regular customers is Patty Baumeister of Downingtown, who signed up for pottery classes and could not resist trying on some of the jewelry that is displayed throughout the studio, often on Lorini's clay creations.

"It's the ultimate feel-good jewelry," Baumeister said. "It's fun." She often asks Lorini to create a piece of jewelry in certain colors. It may be muted or bold, she said.

Much of Lorini's work is bright and funky. Her jewelry ranges from a necklace of tiny glass bottles that resembles an ancient Egyptian necklace to a bracelet of tiny glass bones. Trays of beautiful one-of-a-kind beads with intricate designs fill her work space.

Over in the clay studio, Lorini cradled the finch that she made after seeing one at a local vet's office. That finch had been injured and nurtured back to health, she explained. As soon as she saw Isaac, the parrot, and Amelia, the cockatoo, "I instantly wanted to sculpt them," she said. The birds will be perched on rocks, and the dove

will have a glass sprig in its beak - her first attempt to merge glass and clay.

As an instructor in clay, Baumeister said, Lorini "guides us as far as technique. As far as what you want to create, it's completely up to you. There's no right or wrong."

Lorini, who grew up in Southern California, said: "We were just raised to value art." Her mother worked as a costumer at MGM Studios, where, for 25 years, her grandmother was head of women's wardrobe. "I met Elvis . . . different stars. That was normal stuff," she said. Watching her mother and grandmother at work contributed to her desire to make jewelry.

Already immersed in art, Lorini studied dance and science at the University of Alabama, and later competed in triathlons and worked as a personal trainer. Her art, infused with that same high energy, is diverse and fanciful. "You see a little of everything," she said of her work. "It's like a journey in fantasy."

In her home, there is a cookie jar in the form of a pink-and-pale-green dragon munching on a cookie. She has made furniture of clay, including footstools in the form of an alligator and a fat cat. In her clay studio, a gray-and-white cat bats the air with a paw. A perky little papillon awaits its owner.

Robin Hotchkiss, owner of the Salon des Amis Gallery, said Lorini's animals have personality. "They have a character all their own" that is seen on their faces," she said. "She loves animals and animal forms," Hotchkiss said of Lorini. "Her work is whimsical, colorful and

beautifully done. She's one of my favorite ceramic sculptresses."

"She's very passionate about her work," said Baumeister, an elementary school teacher. "It's not very formal. It's got a presence. It's got an attitude."

"It's how I express my spirit," Lorini said.

Snapshot

Markels Lorini

From clay to glass: "My sister, who works in clay, tried glass and said: 'You have to try the torch.' . . . I became fascinated with the challenge of a whole new world, of lighting the torch and transforming the flame into my creative tool."

The cats at the Diving Cat Studio: An animal lover, Lorini has 10 domestic cats and provides outside shelter and food for a dozen feral and stray cats that wander up to the feed bowls outside her studio and stretch out in the sun. (She also has three dogs.)

The diving cat: Lorini decided to sculpt a diving woman for a sculpture class but ended up creating the diving cat. "I can express myself better through animals than people. I have a lot of joy working on animals. I'm driven to do it."

Goal: "Just to watch people's faces light up at the diving cats is enough for me." With her artwork, Lorini said, "I'm not trying to challenge anyone. I'm trying to give people almost a break, a rest . . . some joy."