

feature

Markels Roberts

Looks Down in an Upward Direction

By Susan I. Shiber

Photography by
Kelly O'Keefe



On the last mild day of autumn, Markels Roberts hunkered down on the curb outside her Diving Cat Studio and Gallery in Phoenixville. Armed with wire brush, WD-40, and a glass of wine, she set out to remove gum, gunk, and general droppings from a decorative metal grate cover embellished with flaming Phoenix logo and 1849 Borough incorporation date. Her ultimate mission was to create commemorative tiles in honor of Phoenixville and its annual Firebird Festival.

Markels Roberts' journey to Diving Cat Studio and Gallery is one of magical episodes, the type fancied by screenwriters and TV series producers. Markels confides, "My artistic aim is to instill a sense of happiness and intrigue in those who stop by to shop and while away the hours." It can easily be said that proverbial diving cat Markels Roberts does just that. Everyone who crosses her prancing path is better for it.

When the metal was pristine, Roberts placed a large lump of clay over the surface and pressed it flat with a rolling pin. She went inside, dried and fired it in the shop's kiln. The result was a series of large and small tiles, instant hits that sold

Far Right: Markels spotted a metal grate cover on the street, and then used it as a pattern to create a mold for making commemorative tiles in honor of Phoenixville and its annual Firebird Festival.

out by Christmas. She fired more to meet demand. “I’m so excited about these tiles,” exclaims Roberts. “The first time I came to Phoenixville, I looked down and saw these beautiful inspirational works of art. And do you know that not one person I’ve spoken to, not one, ever noticed them on the streets of our town.”

It isn’t surprising that Roberts spotted the metal grate covers. The artist, who opened Diving Cat a year ago, is a lifelong scavenger who finds great treasures by looking down as she walks through a life spiced with the joy of discovery. “I



Below: Markels’ work is one-of-a-kind.

am the diving cat,” she insists. “Instinct pulls me in many directions and presents life lessons. This instinct parallels a cat when it spots something in high grass. The inquisitive animal crouches, winds up, and leaps into the unknown. I have the same reaction. When I look down,

I often catch something that enriches my life. My latest leap is this Studio and Gallery. Diving Cat is held tightly in my paws, and I can’t wait to see where it will take me.”

THE PERIPATETIC PUSS

Roberts’ journey to Diving Cat Studio and Gallery is one of magical

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Right: "The thread running through the Gallery is that everything is handmade. Everything. I can honestly say without bravado that people are enchanted when they walk through the door. They tell me, 'It smells so good. It feels so good. I just want to stay here.'"

episodes, the type fancied by screenwriters and TV series producers. Born in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, she rarely spent more than one year in any school. "My father, Jack Roberts, was an adventurer," she says. "He had many careers including helicopter and small plane test pilot. He also invented panel instruments for boats and planes. We moved a lot and even spent a year living on a boat docked in Mexico."

Her parents divorced a few years after, and Markels, two older sisters, and a younger brother moved to California with their mother. It was a formative time for a young girl driven by muses. Her grandmother, Kitty Mager, was MGM Studios head of women's wardrobe and Rikki Roberts, her mom, an MGM costumer. Perusing through Roberts' photo portfolio of memories, brings back an era of glamour when Lana Turner, Ava Gardner (Mager's favorite), Grace Kelly, Judy Garland, and their contemporaries made men swoon and women long for lives of glitter.

"My mother worked on a movie with Elvis Presley, and my grandmother always received Christmas cards from Grace Kelly," recalls Roberts. "They used to bring outfits and accessories home, even those famous ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz*. This part of my past is a big reason why I enjoy adorning

people with alluring clothes, flowing scarves, unusual jewelry, and ultra stylish hats."

Roberts points out that art, as well, influenced her life choices. "Our house was filled with real paintings, never prints. Many people value

doctors and lawyers at the highest level. Not my family. Artists were supreme. Ilya Schor, a distant uncle, was a renowned independent Judaica painter, sculptor, and silversmith. He and his wife, also an artist, were members of a circle of cosmopolitan New



York intellectuals. My mom and dad met at the University of Miami where they were both art majors. My paternal grandmother and namesake Marian Markels made millions as an interior designer."

All the Roberts' children, touched by their family's lifestyle, accelerated in artistic or other fascinating pursuits. J.R. is an acclaimed designer and architect, who is regularly featured in prestigious national magazines. Sisters Kevin and Robin have excelled in many careers, including art.

Roberts fondly credits Venice 6th grade teacher Ms. O'Mara for nurturing her innate creative skills. "The first thing I ever made in art class was a clay llama. I think it was because of that llama that I was selected to participate in an experimental program. Six of us left school every Friday to study art taught by lay people. Imagine that, being out of school all day hanging out in a sculptor's studio and learning to do something you love. At the end of the year, we had an exhibit

and sold our work. I made eye pendants and stamped pieces. To this day, I teach students to make carved and fired clay stamps, and I use them in my popular piece pots. The eye, too, is one of my glass signatures. It actually represents a protective talisman that originated in Mediterranean and Middle East cultures."

Wanderlust took the young artist to Alabama to live with her sister, Kevin. As best friends and fellow

craftspeople, the siblings exchanged skills, and Roberts discovered the sensual pleasure of flame-worked glass beads. During her stay down south, she attended the University of Alabama at Birmingham for two years. Her major – not art, but dance. Always the explorer, she maneuvered her way into a pre-med program sans prerequisites. She admits that it was to be close to a boyfriend, but she

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excelled in class. "I like science and love the human body, so it was fascinating for me. I have to laugh looking back at myself dissecting cadavers in a medical school."

The self-proclaimed diving cat married (no, not the pre-med student) and settled in Woodstown, New Jersey, where she worked in ceramics and sold at craft shows. She divorced after moving to Wallingford, Pennsylvania, an ideal setting

for a home studio. Art sales were not ample enough to be a sole source of income after divorcing, thus Roberts took advantage of yet another talent. An athlete and committed body builder, she took a job as a personal fitness trainer and became the general manager of One on One in Philadelphia and then launched Markels & Associates. "I trained executives, such as the Kormans and Resnicks," says Roberts. "The

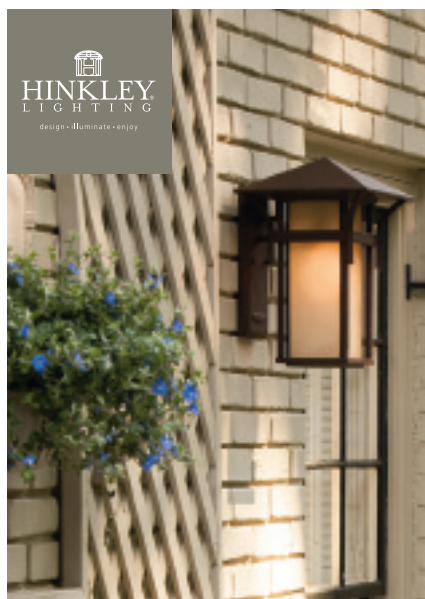
Resnicks flew me to the south of France in summer and to Los Angeles. They commissioned me twice a year to come out and train with them. I produced workout videos and ran in triathlon races. It was a whole other life."

A second marriage took Roberts to northern California, but she missed the East Coast, so the couple came back and settled in Chester Springs. She finally had the opportunity to devote full-time attention to art. A small home gallery featured only her pottery and flame-work glass jewelry. Working with 15 other artists, she mounted Diving Cat Studio and Gallery shows that are held twice a year. "I enjoy collaborating with, and promoting artists, and creating vignettes to showcase their media," notes Roberts.

THE DIVING CAT POUNCES ON PHOENIXVILLE

Long, lean, and lithe, Roberts makes an ideal multi-medium mannequin. Her art to wear collection is a head to ankle canvas of imaginative mode. On any given day, she attracts smiles, perhaps for a jaunty House of Paulina faux leopard beret that sports one of her grandmother's antique buttons. Maybe it's the sweeping hand-dyed silk wrap from One Wing Studio. Or her flame-work sculpted cat head. Could be magnetic clasp beaded peeper keepers that secure her glasses or one of many handcrafted rings, bracelets, or earrings that catch attention. How fantastic it would be to assemble these artistic collectibles where people could buy them.

Roberts imagined wonderfully unusual space for such a venture. When she decided to open a gallery shop and studio, she picked Phoenixville for many reasons. "I love the idea of being in a little town where I can ride my bike to work, have a social life, go to a movie, and relax in coffee shops or restaurants," she lists. "Phoenixville is a delight to the eyes. It has a beautiful history and magnificent architecture. The story of the phoenix rising from ashes that is recreated each year is captivating.



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PABA (Phoenixville Area Business Association) and Main Street Community Development Corporation are responsible for exciting events and bringing numerous businesses to our street. I'm ecstatic about everything."

Roberts spent a year walking up and down the streets of her newly chosen home to find the perfect building for Diving Cat. "It was auspicious that the site I coveted was available," she remarks. "Dave Chawaga and Steve Friedman, owners of Legacy Property Group, restored it. They're heroes in town. Just look at what they did," she extols with arms outstretched in awe. "The stained glass façade windows are original, and there is plenty of storefront space for me to showcase merchandise and also set up torches and demonstrate bead-making for passersby to observe."

One of the oldest buildings in Phoenixville, it dates to the mid-19th century. Site of Charles Klenk Dry Goods & Trimmings, stock included satins, dress materials, woolens, cottons, linens, and ladies ready to wear. Chawaga and Friedman extracted five layers of flooring to reveal 140-year-old Southern yellow pine, which they refurbished to its authentic splendor. They removed an 8-foot dropped ceiling and restored the original 14-foot height, adding tin panels and ceiling fans. A brick wall from dry goods store days adds an authentic rustic touch for display, kiln, and work area at the rear of Diving Cat. Roberts installed additional lighting.

EXPECTATIONS MATCHED AND SURPASSED

Diving Cat's twofold goals encompass realistic financial bottom lines and relationship building. "As far as a business budget, I had two figures in mind, one the monthly amount needed to make ends meet and the other, what I dreamed of bringing in," explains Roberts. "I put money aside to cover me when I didn't achieve the first, but guess what; I never had to use it. Gross income consistently met what I had to have and in May and December, I

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reached my high objectives. I thought that would take years, but Celtic and Firebird Festivals were amazing draws.”

Robert’s secondary raison d’être to establish a fun-filled socializing spot was quickly accomplished, as well. “Diving Cat is designed as a comfortable, homelike place, a place of warmth and ambience, not merely shelves and displays. There’s always homemade cookies, always wine, always opportunity for new friendships. The thread running through the Gallery is that everything is handmade. Everything. I can honestly say without bravado that people are enchanted when they walk through the door. They tell me, ‘It smells so good. It feels so good. I just want to stay here.’”

Pottery classes presented in a casual atmosphere with no attendance commitment

are another appeal. “People are busy and may not be able to maintain a rigid schedule,” points out Roberts. “Adults are welcome every Wednesday and Thursday night and kids on Sunday afternoons. You pay when you come, and you come when you can.”

Pauline Monson, the milliner behind House of Paulina, is a longtime student who prefers this unrestricted schedule. “It’s such a great idea that allows us to progress at our own pace. Markels guides you technically and won’t let you fail. We have so much fun. We talk, nibble, drink wine, support each other, and stay until all hours.”

PHOENIXVILLE PURRS WITH PRAISE FOR DIVING CAT

Roberts delights in the rapid growth of Phoenixville and its community promotion. Diving Cat introduces exciting artists for First Fridays and recently added music. In just a short time, the studio, gallery, and pottery school have attained benchmark status in the Borough. “We are absolutely thrilled that Diving Cat Studio and Gallery is here,” says Chawaga, who reports 100 percent occupancy for Legacy properties, which, in addition to Diving Cat, include two residential buildings. The company is currently renovating the old District Court building and anticipates the opening of additional new retail businesses.

“Phoenixville is an authentic 1870s steel town,” continues Chawaga, “and its rebirth is enticing a group of young professionals, who are moving from areas like Manayunk. There is a dramatic difference in Phoenixville’s per-



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sonality since we got involved in restoration seven years ago. Who would have thought then that an artist of the caliber of Markels Roberts would have been interested in opening a business in our town? We are fortunate that she did. She brings in other artists and many visitors. Work is one-of-a-kind and prices are reasonable. It's much nicer and more personal to give an original handmade gift."

Among these one-of-a-kind products are painted boxes, woodturnings, hand-woven clothing, hats, gloves, portraits, paintings, tiles, pottery mixed media, jewelry, and of course, Roberts' flame-worked soda lime, Murano, dichroic glass bead works, and clay sculptures. "My artistic aim is to instill a sense of happiness and intrigue in those who stop by to shop and while away the hours."

It can easily be said that proverbial diving cat Markels Roberts does just that. Everyone who crosses her prancing path is better for it. •

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