Artist brings ideas to life

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No textbook definition describes the rich traditions and vivid images of the local culture's folk art. But, like Cajun music and food, Acadiana's visual art basks in its distinctive flavor.

Folk artist Tom Norman celebrates the Cajun culture in both the spirit and form of his creations. He approaches his life and his work with the relaxed joie de vivre of the heritage he recreates in a varied palette of representational art.

When Norman lost his full-time job to the streamlining strategies of a company merger, he took a hard look at himself and saw a middle-aged man without work in a depressed local job market. So, seven years ago the Sunset artist transformed his hobby into his livelihood.

He often stays in the studio till midnight working on one of his "ideas." What results is most often three-dimensional art in one of many final forms: statues, jewelry, window displays and fully decorated seven-foot Cajun Christmas trees.

But the framed three-dimensional scenarios he creates combine the various elements of his tinkering into one distinctive medium. Once a scene or a setting catches his eye, Norman recreates the moment inside a handcrafted red cypress frame. The scenes in his portfolio range from Wayne Toups and his band on stage to an old plantation house or grocery store.

The components of his art stand out from the background, sometimes as far as four to six inches.

Norman molds the human figures from a mixture of rubber and papier mache. He crafts all the wooden features from red cypress he collects tearing down old barns.

Tom Norman, on biblical artwork

"Each body was individually molded and painted. I created hair from a mixture of sawdust and glue and the clothes are all handmade and draped. All the plates on the table are solid brass."

"It would be great. The arms would move and the claws would open and close," he said. "You could use it on Mardi Gras floats or on a billboard. "Let's face it, the goofier it is, the better people like it. We live in a pretty crazy world."

The Last Supper was created on consignment for an individual, but the elements in its composition are the basics of all Norman's creations. Such small wooden details as musical instruments and furniture move from framed art to jewelry, doll house furniture, Christmas tree ornaments and individual statues.

As new ideas come along, Norman simply adds another element to the crafts he sells year-round at public events as the Cajun French Music Association's awards festival. But one idea could change the way Norman sells his creations.

He would like to buy and restore an old grocery store where he could teach three-dimensional art classes and display his work. Another sign that Norman is starting to think big. His latest idea is to create a 24-foot animated crawfish using the skills he has learned molding small human figures.

Photos by Kim Andrus

Once a scene catches Norman's eye, he recreates the moment using red cypress for a frame.