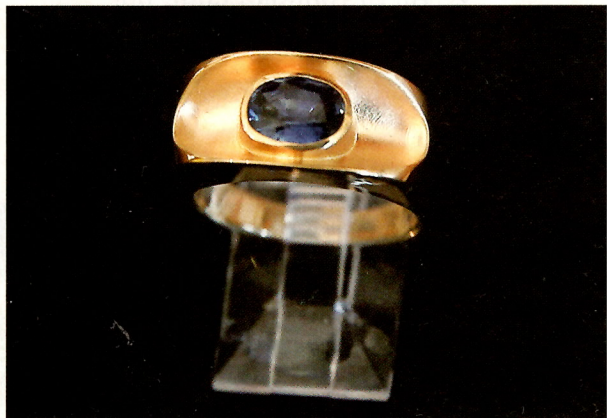
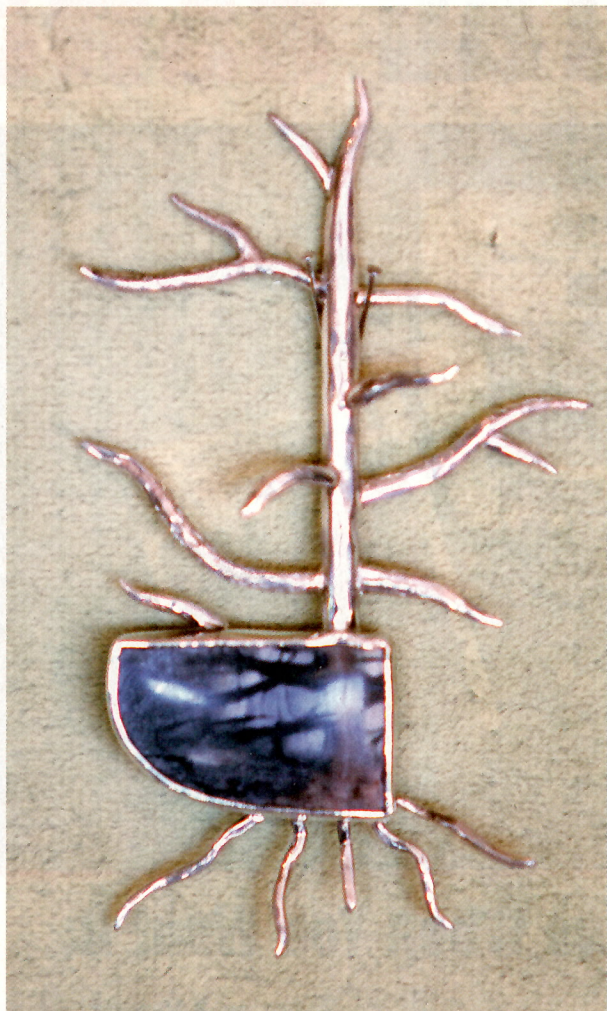




SWVA LIVING ART



H E R O W N

Story by **CHRISTINA NIFONG**

Photography by **STEPHANIE KLEIN-DAVIS**

**N**EARLY EVERY MORNING, Sarah Muse downs her coffee, drops her teenaged son at school, then climbs the steep hill behind her house to her sunlit studio at the base of Roanoke County's 12 O'Clock Knob.

She passes a motley flock of chickens, a sculpture of children dancing and several stacks of stones. The cairns — an ancient Gaelic tradition for marking the way in a land without roads — dot the woods, the creeks and the cliffs across the 100 acres where Muse makes her home.

A standout in her field of custom art jewelry, Muse is a long-time figure on the Roanoke cultural scene, a juried member of the Artisans Center of Virginia and the founder of the Southwestern Virginia Metal Arts Guild.

Her work is both inspired by nature and forged from it — riverbed pebbles, oyster shells, sand and seed pods and tree cones. Her designs trapeze walk between sculpture and accessory, sometimes defying gravity with their swirls and motion.

But the adoption of her son from India and her family's relocation to the side of a mountain pulled Muse away from shows, commissions, awards. She was creating still, renovating a home, tending garden and orchard, raising a boy in the woods. But for seven years, Muse's designs sat mostly quiet.

Those who know her say her return was a given. It was only so long before the allure of heat and hammers became too strong.

"I put it out into the universe and a funny thing happened," says Muse, all angles and freckles and gesticulation. "I started getting commissions again."

So she turned, as if one of her land's many cairns had pointed her there, back to her studio.

Now, with a new jewelry collection, a space in The Market Gallery in downtown Roanoke, an invitation as a guest artist for Roanoke's Open Studios Tour, her way seems clear: It's time for Sarah Elizabeth Kidd Muse to take everything she's lived in her 50 years and transform it into her art.

## L I F E C H A N G E S

Muse rock-skipped from Roanoke to Blacksburg to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, then back to Botetourt as a child, following her father's computer programming career.

She remembers her childhood as if flipping through a portfolio: soaking up art books at her grandmother's, taking watercolor painting lessons, winning art contests, working as an assistant to

the art teacher in high school.

"I always needed to be doing," she remembers. "I was either outside or I was creating."

For college, she landed in Richmond, at Virginia Commonwealth University, where her immersion into every possible art medium was like drinking from a mountain stream after a long thirst.

Muse flirted with fashion design and textiles, but metal smithing was what won her heart. Workshops at Penland School of

Crafts in North Carolina sealed her desire: soldering and welding, casting and annealing would be how she spent her days.

She took an apprenticeship with jeweler Robert Smith in Blacksburg and was hired a year after that. Six days a week, Muse repaired, designed, sold to customers and soaked up every facet of the jewelry-making business.

"We had a great chemistry," Smith remembers. "I love to engage other jewelers in the work process. A lot are 'wagoners' copying the trends, techniques ... that are [in] fashion. Sarah always

stayed true to her art, moving into her creative metal forming. [Her] experiments and ideas melded into a stunning body of work."

After three years, Muse moved back to Roanoke, reunited with her boyfriend, Chris Muse, and set out to make it as a jeweler on her own.

These were heady days, designing at Studios on the Square downtown and founding the metal arts guild. She worked with the League of Roanoke Artists, showed at sidewalk art shows and open studios-style tours, completed commissions and taught classes. She and Chris bought and renovated the house on Day Avenue they were renting. And they married.

Life was good. But she and Chris wanted something more.

Creating one day, she glanced at a piece of copper she'd been sculpting, and she saw herself. The shape of it, the indentations, it looked like a bulging belly.

"Sometimes the copper will speak to you," she says.



## METAL AND STONE

Artworks and jewelry by Sarah Muse include (left, clockwise from top): a silver pin of a tree growing around a stone; copper pieces framed together; detail of another work in copper; and a ring made of gold.

# MUSE

**Sarah Muse's renowned art and jewelry is both inspired by nature and forged from it**



She and Chris were ready for their baby.

What followed were tests and hard conversations, and in the end, Muse made her peace with the fact that the only expectant womb she would have would be made of metal and hang on her studio wall.

The couple selected India as their country of adoption and were matched with an infant. Then came two-and-a-half heartbreaking years of red tape and delays. But after a whirlwind trip to Mumbai, Chris, Sarah and their now-toddler Vedant finally arrived home.

## LIVING ON THE LAND

With the dawn of 2008, a deep recession swept across the world and tumbled Roanoke's art scene along with it. Studios on the Square staged its last show. The Artisans Center of Virginia shuttered its gallery.

Muse was mulling how to instill in her brown-eyed boy a sense of wonder for the wilderness. At the same time, Chris's mother offered Sarah and Chris the chance to buy the family property and the home Chris had grown up in.

All these paths were converging. And the stack of stones spoke to the Muses. For the first time, the cairn pointed Sarah away from her art. Muse traded her gold and silver for soil and seedlings.

The three Muses moved into a two-room cabin Chris had built with his father as a teen. For months, the bulldozers churned and the carpenters sawed on the property and the main house until the Muses emerged, like butterflies after a long gestation, into their new life.

This one brimmed with wild berry picking and critter hunting in the creek, with mud parties and cobbler-making, with roosters and coyotes and hawks and the circle of life playing out in their back yard.

For years, they hosted a weeklong summer camp for Vedant and his friends. They created an apple harvest tradition where friends and family gather to make pies on the patio and cider from an old-fashioned press.

Muse didn't detach completely from her art. There were commissions still. And she became invested in the reinvention of the Artisans Center of Virginia in Staunton. As a volunteer and board member, she helped the ACV become an organization that promotes artisans as a draw for tourism in communities across Virginia.

As Vedant grew older and more involved with his

## "SOMETIMES THE COPPER WILL SPEAK TO YOU"

Sarah Muse works in a variety of metals, making both installation pieces and jewelry. She also uses natural stones (middle) in many of her pieces. Earrings are embellished with stone (left) in a box with a few other pieces. Muse is an invited artist for Roanoke's Open Studios in April and a featured artist at The Market Gallery in May.

North Cross friends and sports teams, Muse could feel the winds of change blowing again.

"I think life is very cyclical," she explains. "Things come around in circles for a reason."

### 'LISTEN TO THE WIND'

Muse's studio is a part elementary school science center, part fine art gallery. Like her work itself, it is wind-swept, alive, teeming.

Eighteen months ago, it was covered in looped silver wings, a commission from Carilion Clinic, the job that led Muse back to full-time metal smithing.

Today, hand-hammered architectural tiles hang beside dozens of tools. Across counters and tables, curls of copper and cases of rings scatter alongside whorling whelk shells and piles of acorns. One wall displays a series of shadow-box frames, each holding three mini metal tiles. The trick is that each sculpture is a brooch that can be removed and worn, then placed back in the frame to be viewed as art.

"I know Sarah is happiest when she is able to create," says Chris Muse, a writer. "She has this compulsion to create. It's a calling. It's something that can't be suppressed, really."

The Carillon commission was followed by a trunk show at Frantz Diamonds and Jewelry and then an open house at Muse's studio. This year promises even more: She's an invited artist for Roanoke's Open Studios in April and a featured artist at The Market Gallery in June.

Despite the curves and the bends along the way, the stacks of stones haven't steered Muse wrong yet.

"I believe that if you listen to the wind," she says, her dark eyebrows arching with intensity, "it will take you in the right direction." ★

### WHERE TO FIND MUSE'S ART

#### ***The Market Gallery***

23 Salem Ave., Roanoke

#### ***Open Studios Tour of Roanoke***

April 28-29, 1930 Arden Road, Roanoke

#### ***Sarah EK Muse at Stduo 12***

524.2764, saramuse.com

*You are invited to the 7th Annual*

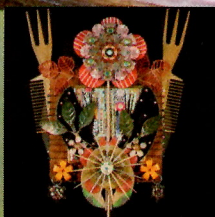
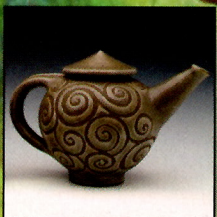
## Lexington Rockbridge Studio Tour

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