

Loyola University New Orleans
Digital Humanities Studio

The Louisiana Art Project

Interview with Gary Ward

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Interviewer: Tristin Gaspard

Abstract:

Gary Ward shares his passion for birdhouse building and how it evolved into a unique business, Big Easy Birdhouses. He highlights the attention to detail and creativity he brings to each birdhouse, making each one a unique piece of art. Gary also discusses his expertise in creating custom birdhouses, emphasizing the importance of craftsmanship, attention to detail, and accommodating bird behavior. He recounts a customer who returned a birdhouse, leading him to improve the design and materials for durability and customer satisfaction.

Gary Ward (0:0): Hi, I'm Gary Ward. I've lived in Metairie Louisiana, for a good part of my life.

I started building birdhouses as a hobby when I retired, and turn it into a small business called Big Easy Birdhouses, you know, keying on the words Big Easy in New Orleans, The Big Easy. And so we're going to talk a little bit more about that in the next few minutes. So I started that's, that's a really interesting question. And something that's difficult to answer. I started doing it because it was something simple that I could do with woodworking, I could use some creativity and in the different designs that I came up with the coloring the painting, it was more manageable than building dog houses. I'm not really a doll house person, people had asked me that, to do that type of thing. Some people have asked me to build mailboxes, and that type of thing to some of those just seemed too big. And I enjoyed the detailed work too. So that's where I felt with birdhouses, I could implement some of the detail that I really liked doing. That's basically been my nature a lot, you know, be at home improvement projects or anything like that, I enjoyed the detail. So I could do this with birdhouses architecture was also interesting to me. And so it all just kind of fell into place. Some of this, depending on your personality, just just naturally fall into place quilting, I would never be a good quilter, artistry, I'm not good at the the faces and the ratios of faces and things like that. I grew up in actually the city of New Orleans. And once I got married, we moved across the parish line to Metairie. So you grew up around, you grew up around architecture, I've grown up, I've grew up around the architecture in New Orleans my entire life. I mean, for many years, I've heard people comment that this is a very unique area to live. It's, it's got a lot of different types of architecture from you know, and I've appreciated it throughout my life, but I've never really started implementing it until I got into building the birdhouses. And I thought I needed a niche. There's low there's 1000s of different sub birdhouses out there many very simple, you know, the glass doorknob as a perch or a door handle or used wood, things like that. And I said, Well, what can I do that might be a little different. Then let me try and implement some of the New Orleans iconic architectural structures into the business. Be it the French Market area, just a plain shotgun house. What could I do with that I've got cemetery tombs. There are buildings like the Circle Food Store, it's very unique. The French Market's unique just just things of that type. I've had people who wanted, say, St. Louis Cathedral because they got married there. And they wanted the

clock on the cathedral to say four o'clock which is exact time they got married there. I've had special orders for the Saenger Theatre because the person who commissioned me their parents had their first date there and she wanted this as a memento for them. I've had people local people whose family business was a hardware store on Veterans Boulevard and they were retiring and they wanted their parents to remember this hardware store so they gave me photos or and or drawings and sketches of it. People have commissioned me to do, founder of Timesaver his parents saw me at a local art fair. And they wanted me to do a version or replica of the very first Timesaver that was this man ever came up with so those are some examples of Ah, special order our custom items that I've built. The Camelia Grill. Man saw my work in a store wanted to know if I could do a Camelia Grill for him. Let me give it a try. They're artistic enough. And that's something I put in the little text. online where you can buy a mid it's it's small enough and decorative enough that you can use it inside as a decorative item. You don't have to put this outside as a birdhouse. But it is artistic enough. And anywhere you put it people going to appreciate it for the detail for the colors. There's a whole variety of colors and trim sizes I put in it. Each time I go to a house it's it's basically one of a kind. You know, I'm in my mind, I'm playing with the trim style. What can I do differently? When I see in the newspaper a different style of shotgun with a different trim style on or porch design or anything like that. My mind's working on it the next time I go outside to build a new house. Okay, how can I modify this trim to be slightly different, a challenge for me to make it more fun for me to do. Lately, I've also gotten into mixing paints. Now originally, I bought a couple of basic colors of paint. And then a person would challenge me to do say, a custom birdhouse where I needed a different shade of red or I need to come up with some a brick color for the particular building that they picked. Well, I'd start taking some reds and some purples and I get out my little color wheel. And it says if I mix this and this, I get this. And just just for naturally looking at the colors, I started coming up with a whole palette of colors. And I actually actually made a chart if I have one part of marlboro blue and the three parts of deep Rose Red, I'm going to get the shade. So I've got sheets of little color samples, listing all the different colors that I mixed together in certain ratios to get this color.

Tristin Gaspard (7:14): So it is so if you get a commission, it is extremely accurate?

Gary Ward (7:17): I'm working to make it so even. Let's face it, if you do a St. Louis Cathedral, I cannot replicate everything that's on there. You don't appreciate the detail until you've done it. But I can I can get enough detail on it that when you look at it, there's no question what it is. And now I have turned down some projects. A person wanted me to build a special church. It's uptown. I can't think of the name of it offhand. This one has it had multiple spires as you you in addition to the front spire or as I call it, something that she went as she went down behind it, there were multiple spires going down. And I just told the lady this was really kind of beyond what I thought I could do. There are points when you say this is too much. There are points when you say this is too little. Gentlemen wanted had me do the Davy Crockett firehouse in Gretna as a model, I thought it came out excellent. It's a historic building. It was a challenge. It has a bell tower. It has wood siding on it. Some curved arches were the doorway to the carriage house was I mean, that's how old this place is. So yeah, I, I underestimated the difficulty and I didn't charge him nearly what I should have based and I tracked the hours on these things to give me an idea of what it takes to do this. So if somebody asked me to do another one, at least I have some idea that, you know, that's gonna take me 80 hours, you don't just go out and start cutting wood, I have to create a construction drawing. I have an architectural plan for every single category of house. Well, I use, I use the plan for the basic dimensions of it, but at a certain point, you can you can skip beyond that and then modify the trim to be anything you want. You know, the basic dimensions of the house are pretty much set. I know it's gonna have a porch, you know, it's gonna have this type of roof. But then when I get to the porch trim or the shutters or the windows or the things of that type. I can do whatever I want. So in that sense, each one is custom. They don't have the same trim. They don't have the same paint. I started putting shingles or real shingles on some of the houses that I do you. People seem that they like that they think it's going to last it's unique. It's, it's just different. All the materials I use are waterproof, exterior great, I'm using house paint, not using artists paint that you would use to, you know, paint paint oil painting is something, this is the same paint that I would use to do exterior grade shutters or woodwork on the outside of your house, it's built to last outside, this thing is built to

last just as it's built like a small house, same materials, same workmanship, and then go into it just a small scale, through experience in selling these at art markets. And online, I have a feeling that certain colors, and our designs are more popular than others. So gradually, I know I need to make more than one of these, or this call is just not working. You know, there's one part of them that I've had for years, and I just cannot sell this thing for whatever reason, instead of putting windows and shutters on it, I put a small Fleur-de-li on it. And nobody is going for this. It's either overkill or it's just not as designed. It's popular. So I know I'm never going to do another one of those again, there's a nother design that I used for seafood market that just seemed to take years to sell. The ones that I've built up kind of moved away from those. Now another design that I initially did for a generic snowball stand, which is kind of unique and popular in the city that went over great. I mean, that was one of the first ones that I ever came out with. People were snapping him up. On some some respect, I may have underpriced them. But it was a first chance I'd even gotten out to try selling these products to people. It was trial, trial and error. What I had to be fair to myself, and play with the price point, I didn't have any idea how these would go over. If nothing else that catches your attention fascinates me is I go to a large say a large art market like the Three Rivers in Covington, which I've done several times. You watch the potential customers walk by, and they walk by and and they'll just stop. And they'll look. And they'll say what what what are these? What? Because there's there's no sign up telling you what it is. I mean, in this particular art market, they they don't encourage you to put up a big sign that says Big Easy Birdhouses you've got your your display items there, people pretty well figured out what it is. But in this case, a lot of people don't really understand what they're seeing. So then just stop, and then they'll come closer. Ah, that's what it is. And just just the fascinating watching the people figure out their right in some some struck, you'll hear a different terms. Awesome. These are awesome. That didn't necessarily mean anybody's gonna buy it. But they're intrigued by it, they appreciate the craftsmanship. I get appreciation just from hearing that those types of comments, even when they don't buy it. I like the idea that I really grabbed their attention. They really appreciate the product. You'll get other people who come in, I got to have one. And you know, they'll just they'll all they'll take the time or they'll you just see that they're they're confused. Well, I like this one. I like this one. I

like this one go to what I do, I don't know. Some people will come they'll think about it. Come back later in the day and and get what they want. A lot of cards fly out. Well, let's face it, these are not inexpensive, birdhouses that you're going to put out unless you appreciate the they are going to Michaels and get one for \$5 Yeah, and you can paint it yourself. Yeah. It's not built nearly as good. It's probably not gonna last outside but a couple seasons. Yeah, I expect this thing to last outside years and years and years, depending on where you put it. How you handle it.

Tristin Gaspard (14:48): How long have you been?

Gary Ward (14:49): I mean, usually we've been doing this started around 2014 When I retired. So what are we talking about? Seven, nine yours Yeah, and you know, so in about nine years and never got someone say, Oh, the paint started wearing or anything. I had one customer who brought one back. And quite honestly, it looked like it wasn't hung up, it almost looked like it sat in a puddle of water. For days, I mean the woods just peel back on it and ever since that's the only one in all the ones and right now I'm up to about a pretty good track record. Well, I'm approaching 600 houses built, it's a good track record over that period of time we one came back, only one has been returned to me, you know, I on the on the website that I'm on the Etsy website. I've got so far all five star reviews. And so I feel good about that I don't want anybody to complain I don't want it to fall apart when they get it. Like I say it's built like a small house, same materials. You know, I use construction grade adhesives to hold the shingles on like I said, this house paint, waterproof glue. What you have to understand, in my former working life. I was a mechanical engineer. I don't I wouldn't feel good about myself, if I built something that I thought was gonna fall apart as soon as the person buys it, particularly now given the price point that I'm charging them you know, if they're if they're willing to pay, in some cases, hundreds of dollars for birdhouse. And it falls apart on them. Well, I'm not going to feel good about it. They're not going to feel good about it. Some somewhere along the line. I'm gonna get this negative review or I'm gonna get a complaint. I don't want I don't want that. I'm not gonna be satisfying. It was designed to play off of the cemeteries cemetery tombs now I've had people say, Oh, that is you know, and that's that's creepy.

You know that that's that's that's gruesome. Why did you think of that? Others think? Wow, this is unique. This is fascinating. This is distinctive. And then when they see the nest and peace. Oh, you know, it's it's funny. Yeah. burdens. Well, there was that was another artistic way of bringing in the culture of New Orleans. What how can I doctor this up? So that's a little, even a little bit more. New Orleans-esque in New Orleans, he so I thought well, voodoo bird you know voodoo, we go to the cemeteries to see Marie Laveau's tomb, and we've got the x's and the Voodoo culture there. How can I bring that in. So it was easy to do on a cemetery. I've told people, you know, if you don't, you don't want a birdhouse, you just want some yard art? Well, let's, let's just paint a piece of wood, black, glue it over the hole. The birds won't mess with it. It's just yard art. So now people have bought some interior decorator items and furnished it, there was no hole. You know, they didn't I didn't put a hole, they just wanted it as a model. A lot of people want me to build the model of their house. But why and I don't take those on for a specific reason. I have to create the architectural drawing, I have to scale it to their house.

Tristin Gaspard (18:46): There's a lot of work beforehand that goes into...

Gary Ward (18:47): That takes, it usually takes at least two days to come up with just the drawing. And then I've got to spend the time to make it just like their house. And you've got to you've got to keep it to a scale that it's reasonable to, you know, above above a certain length, width and height. You're not going to have any place to put it.

Tristin Gaspard (19:15): Do you have a certain scale that you can use like if someone gives you blueprints?

Gary Ward (19:18): I would with how you scale them down, scale it down mainly by looking at the overall size I want. I mean they're not 1/32 and 1/72 side I wondered about that. Why does the scaling have to go? Yeah, when I got when I'm getting 12 or 13 inches in width across the front of it or the length depending on the specific model. I'm starting to say this is a little, it's getting made a little bit big. Through experience I've found that certain sizes sometimes are too big. Some are too small. I've actually made an original one that I

thought was too big. So I'll scale that down a little bit. And it came out just as well. And I end up going the other way too. Because it is a bird house, you need a certain size hole to get it and for the bird to get into, you need a certain interior space for the bird to be usable. Not I didn't just go out and or I did some research for getting into the, into the whole thing. In the Gulf Coast region, a certain size hole is would be average. And I can't remember what it is actually off the top of my head here. But it's an average look even on the drill, can you Well, yeah, I've got the drill bit out there, I think it's one and three eighths. Okay, that's an average sized hole for a typical bird in the Gulf Coast region. And I need a certain interior, about six by eight inches or so for, for usable space inside of it. And beyond that there's a clean out on each birdhouse. So you can clean it out if you want to. There's drain holes. So there's vent holes, I have some of these actually in my house. And I've watched the birds use them come in go out. People say you know, you don't need a perch. You know, birds don't need perches, you know, on a tree, there's no perch out there. But if you watch the bird houses that I built, the perch is is used. I've made perches that are actually flat and somewhat long and extend out. And quite honestly the birds love it. Because it's a it's a place for them to just stop. And rest. And particularly if they have young birds inside, they can feed the bird, it's inside, then they can fly off. Most of the perches, I use our dowels that just project out a little and that's that's pretty much standard on a birdhouse there. You've got to have the bird got to be able to get in and then it's got to be able to get out. I mean, if you see a bird house that's, you know, 15 inches deep and holes way at the top, you've got to think you've got to think like a bird. If I fly in there, how am I gonna get out? You know, if I get stuck down the bottom here and I don't have enough room to flap my wings and get back out then. So yeah, some of it. Got to think like a bird. You know, what do I want to get in here? If it rains? Is the rain going to come in, flood out this thing? If I don't have any drain holes on it? How's it gonna get out? Now, if I was trying to build a doll house. In comparison, ah, I don't know if I can think like a dollhouse person. You know what it is. I played with toys when I was a young person. They were not that many dolls. But building the furniture and things of that type would be way I think way beyond what I would want to get into. And that's one reason I just would not want to want to do that. If you go to one of these hobby stores and see some of the doll houses that are there. I think the competition would be just way too

stiff. I couldn't recreate it at a reasonable price. Yeah, these things are being made by artists and cheap labor in some sometimes in foreign countries and plastic. There that's not a market I'm trying to compete with.