

quite the collection

New Iberia Schoolteachers Becky and Wyatt Collins oversee an impressive and improbable folk art catalog

BY WILLIAM KALEC | PHOTO BY ROMERO & ROMERO

When considering a piece for their collection, Wyatt Collins studies the background of artists, collectability and the value of the work.

Becky Collins has an eye for great pieces and for her part in the collection collaboration follows her gut and heart.



FROM THE VERY BEGINNING, THE BECKY and Wyatt Collins Folk Art Collection — the same collection you can see at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette’s Paul and Lulu Hilliard Art Museum from now until the end of the summer — was D.O.A.

Which, when you think about it, makes sense considering the first piece Wyatt ever ordered was a tiny coffin by James Henry “Son” Thomas, the blues singer from Greenville, Mississippi.

“I still think it’s one of the greatest things I’ve ever seen in my life,” Wyatt says. “Becky hates it.”

Wait, wait...what was wrong with the coffin, Becky?

“Probably the fact that it was just so ugly,” she says without hesitation thanks to the equity built up in a long marriage. “So primitive. The day the package arrived from Texas, Wyatt screamed, ‘Becky, you have got to see this!’ His face was as lit up as a Christmas tree. ‘My first piece of folk art has arrived! I can’t wait to show it to you.’ And he opened it up and I looked at it and here is this dead man in a coffin with a tooth and I’m going, ‘AIIIIIIIIright?’ But because I have so much faith in my husband, I didn’t voice any reservations.”

That’s a good thing, because had Becky objected way back when, surely the Collinses’ modest home wouldn’t be bursting at the seams with folk art like it is today. Close to 2,000 pieces — from here, there, and basically everywhere — fight for precious real estate among bothersome necessities like furniture and refrigerators. Not to get too Seussian, but there’s art on the walls, in the halls, crammed in a box, next to the rocks, scattered on the floor and tucked away in the attic there’s some more. Heck, there’s even art hanging on the ceiling. So watch your head.

“We really don’t have any more space,” Wyatt says. “But that never stopped us.”

For a few months, anyway, the Hilliard Museum at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette will help lighten that creative load via an exhibit titled, “Spiritual Journeys: Homemade Art from the Becky and Wyatt Collins Collection.” Museum staff along with art students at the university assisted in researching artists, restoring and cleaning certain pieces that might not have received marquee display status.

According to the brochure, the display is “an encyclopedic survey of vernacular Southern art ...the very subjective and social constructions of cultural categories such as ‘self-taught,’ ‘outsider,’

‘contemporary,’ ‘folk’ and ‘visionary’ art forms. The diversity of materials and backgrounds represented in this exhibition forges a dynamic understanding of place.”

Sure, it’s all that, but hidden between that fancy, syllable-ridden, PR language is a love story — a testament to what blossoms when you share a hobby with your honey.

“Wyatt collects with his head and I collect with my heart,” Becky says. “It means he’s an expert, and I’m really not. Wyatt studies and spends hours researching.”

Wyatt interjects.

“I have studied contemporary folk art a lot, and do think I know a lot about it — the background of the artist, their collectability and value,” he says. “But Becky’s taste is something I respect. Her eye for a quality piece is something. She has a knack for it.”

Knack is one thing. Nerve is another. Luckily, Becky isn’t afraid to go the distance when hunting for an artistic gem. In fact, while the pieces within their collection are treasured, the true reasons for all this effort — for all those U-turns and unleaded fill ups on the weekends as they bounce from auctions to flea markets — are the free stories that come with the purchase.

“It’s more than the piece of folk art,” Becky says. “It’s noodling around to see if you can find obscure pieces, poking in boxes, peeking under tables. And once you find them, you learn about the artist and the motivation behind the work. Then they open up and [are] all so willing to share with you — share their life and their story. For all the years doing this, we’ve yet to meet any stinkers. There may not be any stinkers in the folk-art community, and if there are, we’ve been lucky enough to avoid them.”

The exhibit at the Hilliard Museum isn’t the first instance that the Collinses have loaned their folk art to a museum. In 2008, the Acadiana Center for the Arts formally displayed the collection in an exhibit called “From Inside Our Hearts: Outsider Art.” Then, in the spring of 2016, the Kentuck Art Center in Northport, Alabama hosted the Collins Collection for two months.

“We don’t have the money to buy a Picasso or a Renoir or what have you — because if I had that kind of money, we’d be collecting \$51 million Warhols,” Wyatt says. “But this is something we never really did to have an exhibit someday, or to make money doing. This is just something we enjoyed doing together and have never stopped enjoying doing together.” ◀

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the mother of all pies

Imani Guillory Fruge has Cajun country and beyond talking about her savory Southern pies

BY WILLIAM KALEC
PORTRAIT BY ROMERO & ROMERO

Imani didn't find out she was pregnant with her first son, Jason Paul, until three days before he was born in January of 2015.



AS DELIVERY DAY NEARS, THE CEO of this accidental (and delicious) business frantically races around the rented commercial kitchen.

The whole place is hot. It's sweaty. It smells like meat and butter and cheese. It ain't pretty. Actually, it's a grind, Imani Guillory Fruge is quick to point out.

But somehow, "Cajun Mama" manages to make the whole damn process look glamorous.

Chicly outfitted in luxury brand shoes, dresses and handbags, Fruge doesn't mind if grease splatters on her designer goods if it means a \$35 savory southern pie gets shipped to Abbeville on time.

"A lot of my friends joke and say I look like one of those Real Housewives on TV," Fruge says. "And I get it, because I like to look nice and it makes me happy. But at the same time, those women aren't doing what I'm doing. They aren't cooking. They aren't covered in flour running from oven to oven in stilettos. That's real.

"Those pies, those are my babies," Fruge says. "I talk to them, 'Hey girls, you're looking beautiful. Only 10 more minutes left. Mama loves you. Bake for mama.' Yes, my friends think I'm psycho."

The only thing that's crazy however, is the meteoric success of Cajun Mama Pies a little over a year after its founding. It's a wonder why Fruge fooled around getting her J.D. from LSU, and didn't start slinging Loaded Cajuns (her best seller packed with sirloin, spicy chicken, thick-cut bacon, three kinds of cheese and a whole lotta love) sooner.

On average, Cajun Mama ships 200 pies weekly to destinations both near and far, and around holidays those online orders — www.cajunmamas.com

com for those getting hungry — tend to double. The rush has been so delightfully overwhelming that Fruge is flirting with the idea of leasing a storefront this summer and then hiring an actual staff instead of shamelessly recruiting her father, attorney and former Louisiana Senator Elbert Guillory, to "come in the kitchen and get down and dirty" when a swarm of orders need completing.

"A lot of people were confused why I would just give up and forego a legal career, and just cook," Fruge says. "You're just in a sweaty kitchen, busting yourself, making all these pies. But at the end of the day, those people know I'm going to do what makes me happy and this is what makes me happy. Plus, usually when I shove my food in their mouth, the questions stop. They get it. At that point, it's a win-win."

Cajun Mama's menu is admittedly simple, but nonetheless satisfying.

After the aforementioned Loaded Cajun, Fruge offers patrons The Cajun Carnival — a pie with boudin, chicken, bacon, caramelized onions, bell pepper, cheddar cheese, mozzarella cheese and pepper jack cheese. If that isn't enough gluttonous goodness for you, the whole thing is topped with seasoned cracklins. Popular during Lenten season is The Big Cajun Catch which subs crawfish tails, gulf shrimp and jumbo lump crabmeat for beef and pork. There's also a vegetarian option, though because of the meat-based ethos of Cajun Mama, that pie is decidedly less fun to describe.

If it sounds like Fruge simply empties the butcher cabinet into her pies, well, that's not far from the truth. In fact, Fruge started making

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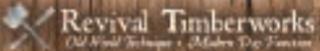


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these quiches for her husband, Jason Fruge, a little more than two years ago. Her recipe? "I just put every meat I could think of into it," she admits. Apparently, the sweep-the-kitchen approach worked, because friends and family raved about the pie. Fruge received so much positive feedback that she informally posted on Facebook that she'd make pies for whoever wanted one for Christmas 2015.

In a matter of hours, Fruge had 60 orders.

Cajun Mama was born...whether Fruge was ready or not.

"OK, problem one, 60 orders! Are you kidding?" Fruge says. "I thought I'd get five or so orders from people who felt sorry for me and wanted to throw me a bone. 'Oh, poor little housewife. You're so cute. Here are a handful of orders.' But no, 60. I had to buy all these boxes. And then I got a bunch more orders for Mardi Gras with locals having friends in from out of town."

In a matter of months, Fruge transformed from housewife to hustler. She registered Cajun Mama as an LLC, found commercial kitchen space in Lafayette and has been solving good problems to have ever since. The majority of orders arrive at residences dotting Acadiana, but out of state shipments to Texas and California have spiked noticeably in recent months as word of mouth has spread.

A true believer in style and substance, Fruge presents her pies in pretty ribbon and other decorations and makes sure to include a photo of her looking at her Cajun Mama-est and her personal contact info with each order. Go ahead. Call her. Text her.

Actually, scratch that. If you're eating a Cajun Mama pie, just text her.

"When you eat my pies, I'm not looking for compliments, I'm looking for silence," Fruge says. "I don't need you to talk. I want you to put another bite in your mouth. If you have time to stop and say, 'Oh this is soooo good' then I didn't bake a good pie. That's kind of the way I see it. So yeah, give me silence." ❖




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catch her if you can

The need for speed sprouted in Lafayette race car driver Sarah Montgomery at an early age

BY WILLIAM KALEC | PORTRAIT BY ROMERO & ROMERO



In addition to being an exceptional racer, Montgomery is also an accomplished clarinetist. She's performed in Carnegie Hall and remains one of the youngest members of the Acadiana Wind Symphony Orchestra.

WITH HER HANDS PLACED AT 10 and 2 on the steering wheel, an anxious fire ignites within Sarah Montgomery. The hum of idle horsepower rattles throughout the frame of the vehicle and when the flag drops, it becomes unbridled.

The intensity forever emblazoned across the face of this 23-year-old freckled redhead is hidden behind a helmet and shield, providing temporary anonymity the obvious outlier relishes. Out here on the track, she's not different, she's not a trendsetter, and she's not "a story." She's just a racer.

Enduring a ruthless test that is equal parts mental and physical, Montgomery straddles the line between speed and control like one of the Flying Wallenda circus performers, while sweat pours at Patrick Ewing levels. A long left. A tight right. A slight brake then punch of the gas. She's in complete control of this savage motorized ballet, maneuvering her car like a Tetris piece...if Tetris pieces zoomed in excess of 140 miles per hour, that is.

Best of all, two years from now, Montgomery — the lone "Cajun Queen of Cars" — will finally be able to rent one from Hertz or Enterprise without a co-signer.

"I don't really look at it like that, look at everything I've done," Montgomery says. "I've always looked forward. I appreciate the things my team has accomplished in racing, and I'm proud of those accomplishments. But I'm always looking for, 'What's next?' It's just the way I see racing, just to push forward and go faster."

Which is why this summer seemed endless — and not in the cool 1970s surfer movie kind of way.

In mid-May — during the infancy of her first season racing the Pirelli World Challenge Series for Shea Racing

— Montgomery rolled her car several times in Turn 2 at the Canadian Tire Motorsport Park in Ontario. The Lafayette native was examined on-site before being transported to a local medical facility for further observation. Montgomery doesn't remember much from the accident, but media reports claim her car flipped eight times. Montgomery suffered a concussion and a few broken ribs — enough to end her 2017 race season prematurely.

When asked about the crash, the usually loquacious Montgomery is at a loss for words...whether organically or intentionally. Either way, her social media accounts provide the most insight into her current state, the most enlightening posts authored on July 13 and August 16, respectively, which read "I'll be back in the cockpit soon," and "God has a plan."

"It's not so much the rehab that's the issue, it's finding the sponsorships," Montgomery says. "That's really the main focus, not if I can race. There's no question about that. I've been racing my whole life."

This never-before-seen (Montgomery is the only female professional race car driver in Louisiana, after all) love affair between little girl and loud engines materialized when Montgomery was 10 years old. Her parents took her to an Indy Car race at Texas Motor Speedway in Fort Worth. In the field that day was Danica Patrick — the most successful woman in open-wheel racing. Added on top of that inspiration was the sensory overload attached to the event — the noise, the smell of burnt rubber and spent fuel, the flash of color racing across impressionable eyes. Montgomery was hooked.

"Just seeing someone do that, my instinct was, 'I want to do that, too!'" Montgomery says.

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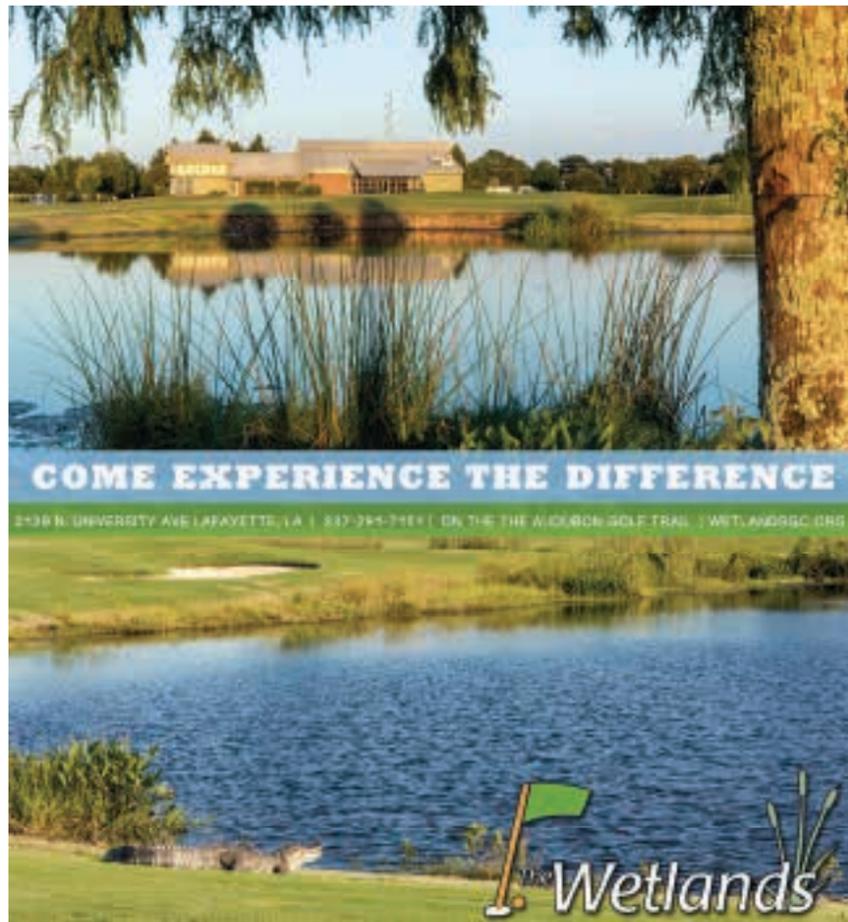
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Unlike traditional sports like baseball, football and basketball, car racing doesn't have an organic or established path to professional stardom. There's no high school auto racing teams, no AAU summer circuits. So Montgomery and her family did their homework and got their then-little girl into the regional go-kart dirt oval track scene at age 13. We're talking tracks hidden amongst myriad backroads, places GPS still hasn't found. The crowds were minimal. The conditions were Spartan. The grind for Montgomery's parents — spending free time hopping from race to race — was beyond real, but the passion Montgomery exuded was genuine.

"Being out there just felt right to me," Montgomery says. "This is where I belong. This is what I'm meant to do. And the years you spend doing that, where there's not a lot of glory and there's not a lot of attention on you, will test if you really want to race. And I really wanted to race. I didn't stop."

While majoring in marketing at University of Louisiana at Lafayette (a degree that's come in extremely handy as she essentially sells her merits to potential sponsors) Montgomery raced on weekends and between semesters. After a few years spent dominating the Specs Miata racing circuit, Montgomery joined ALARA Racing in 2015 and drove the Lemons of Love/Lafayette Convention and Visitors Commission car in the Pro Racing Battery Tender MX-5 Cup — a league with four stops across North America. Montgomery's driving prowess and ability to attract eyeballs caught the attention of Shea Racing earlier this year, as they added the up-and-comer to their Pirelli World Challenge Series lineup, specifically racing in the TCA class.

No matter what or where Montgomery has raced, the fact that she's a girl in a guy's world is always a topic of conversation — a conversation she doesn't duck, but embraces. Montgomery wants to be a role model, wants to blaze a path for followers and — as she so often hashtags on her Twitter account — wants others to know it's OK to #drivelikeagirl.

"It's not too much," Montgomery says of attention usually being the only female on the track attracts. "It's not a burden. It never has been. If someone looks at me as an example, then that's just an honor." ◀

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