

## Artist Unbound



Cult



## The Pilgrim Soul of Dee Marcellus Cole

William Butler Yeats wrote of the “pilgrim soul” in his poem “When You are Old,” a lament to a young woman, a woman who is loved by many for her beauty and charm but whom the poet loves for her true self, her wayfaring spirit and individualism—for her pilgrim soul. Those who’ve met Dee Marcellus Cole, and certainly those who’ve loved her, will find Yeats’ words fitted perfectly to the lady—and prophetic as well, since the verse was published in 1893 and Dee Marcellus wasn’t sprung into the world until 1932, with a blizzard in Buffalo County, Nebraska, heralding the way.

Her artist résumé of exhibitions, lectures and workshops extends back to 1951, and is not recommended reading for those who struggle with low self-esteem or feelings of inadequate production or time management. You can’t hope to compare, you see, for Dee Cole is a *pilgrim soul*, a wandering explorer, both in body and mind, and whether she was snipping herself into a mother/wife silhouette acceptable to rigid 1950s society or is standing now, autonomous and unfettered in her Technicolor living room, Dee Cole has never stopped searching, discovering, devising and driving herself over the creative edge.

We first met when I was a guest on one of her “Dee Tours,” a visiting troupe who, several times a year, are given access to the artist’s home, and who quickly find themselves immersed in a lush, psychedelic-tribal lair crawling with sculptures of half-breeds and harpies, devils and beasts, troglodytes and sprites. The creatures are literally everywhere: fanged things swooping up toward the ceiling, feathered things scurrying down toward the floor, smirking horned heads behind lamps, seedy beady eyes behind couches, and mod fashionistas acid tripping on the outside garden benches.

While on the tour, you’ll also hear tidbits from Cole’s life, and most likely get to see the pair of weathered, dainty moccasins she wore when she was 10 years old and living with her parents in South Dakota on an Oglala Sioux Indian reservation. For that one year in the Badlands, while her father taught all grades and subjects, she was the only white child within a hundred miles, and her class picture is distinctive: a shock of blond, bushy hair on a puffy little porcelain face against a sea of dark schoolmates with black eyes, many of which are turned toward the ground to keep the

camera from stealing their souls. “That was a big influence,” she says, “because I was a minority. And, so, I’ve always been aware of people who are different from me. It also made me want to be ethnic, and I still wish I were. I hate being boring old English.”

English, perhaps, but certainly not boring, and if admiration for other races and cultures runs through her blood, it also runs through her home which is adorned with myriad memorabilia from travels to Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and other parts south. Everywhere, in fact, there is evidence of a life lived broadly and boldly, and the passion that propelled it.

The same can be said of Cole’s art-making. Unorthodox and brazen, she tears her own trail through the thickets of the conventional world, and no one and nothing has ever been able to block her—at least not for long. Twenty-two when she received her AA in art, she would achieve her bachelors at 46 and be 52 when she finally marched out of Claremont Graduate University with master’s in hand. Along the way, she had marriages and children and art jobs at universities, colleges and high schools. No matter which way the wind blew her, Cole never stopped creating—even if it was only manifested in the “ripping up skirts and weaving them into rugs” desperations of a nuclear age housewife who longed for a room of her own.

A lifetime later, decades of drawing, crafting, painting, assemblage and ceramics have evolved into the three dimensional beings that have become her signature. Formed from armatures stuffed and molded with paper, cardboard and glue, they often wear cowboy boots—a footy-fetish she’s had since her tweens when she couldn’t have a pair—and sprout doll arms, tentacles, wings and wheels. At times, they’re twice her size, and at others, they’re minute; always, they are vibrant and appear to have escaped from another dimension. But you’ll have to come up with their narrative yourself—Dee Marcellus Cole wouldn’t dream of telling *you* what to do either. “I find it hard to even title them,” she laughs. “I just keep going and finally, the piece tells me it’s done. And then, they can be whatever you want them to be.”

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