

THE ACCIDENTAL ARTISAN

BY ANDREA JANSEN



How did I go from being a successful career gal to struggling artist?
IN FOUR WORDS, I BOUGHT A BOAT.

In 1997, my partner and I were living in Oregon when we had a pivotal discussion about everyman's dream: quitting our jobs, buying a boat and heading for the Caribbean. A self-taught artist in my spare time, I dreamt of painting for real on some tropical isle like Gauguin. I knew absolutely nothing about boating, but the idea sounded so appealing (and romantic) that four months later Ken, collie Czar and I were proudly sitting on our 1971 33-ft Marine Trader which we'd re-named *Ruff Life*.

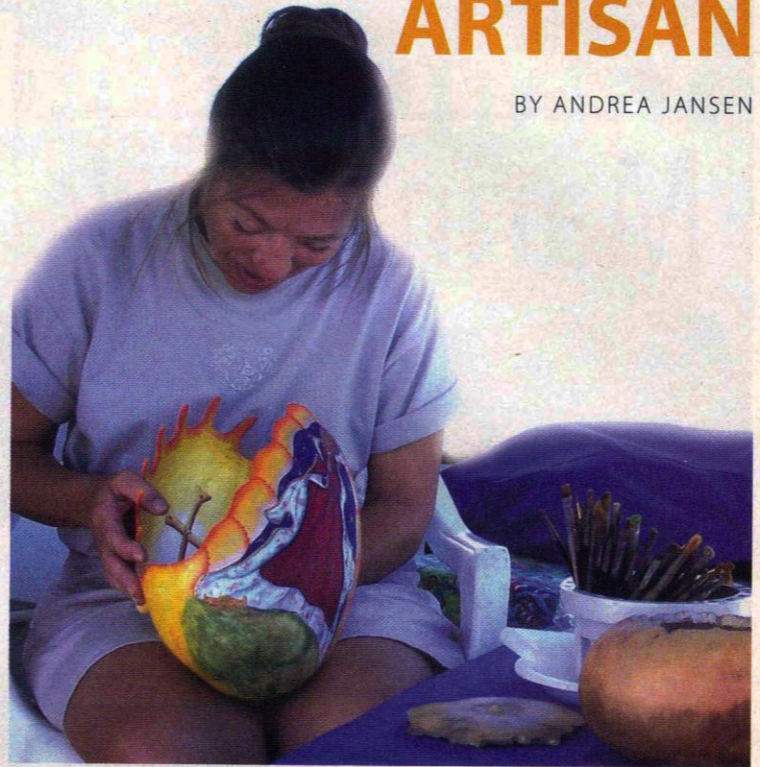
In my former life I had lived and traveled around the world managing manufacturing projects for a NYC firm, and felt confident in my abilities to adapt. Ha! I could hail a cab, but tying knots and reading charts had me stumped. At a Sarasota marine store I asked for the closest equivalent to "Boating for Dummies"; I hadn't even seen "Captain Ron" but after one feverish month of provisioning we were heading south.

Every cruiser has horror stories. Mine started when the refrigerator fell on me during the crossing to West End and pretty much lasted until we arrived in Puerto Rico. Bruised and shell-shocked I refused to go further; malls and fast-food restaurants beckoned and I announced this was home. Ken loved Puerto Rico and jumped right in to our new community of La Parguera, opening a kite-and-flag shop and starting a book exchange, which has grown from a single milk crate to a fully stocked corner of the town's strip mall.

I needed more time to recover...and painting became my therapy. I practiced on anything, especially *Ruff Life's* interior, until a friend gave me a tree-grown gourd to aid in my rehabilitation. This calabash, known locally as the higuera and found throughout the Caribbean, is hard as oak once dried. Traditionally used for tableware, musical instruments and even hair dye, it is now typically made into masks and maracas.

I began fashioning my gourds into simple bowls and sculptured baskets, decorating them completely inside and out and experimenting with brilliant, tropical colors until, without realizing it, I had developed my own style. I became a licensed Artesan (a must-have to attend the best shows on the island), and my functional art, now ranging from salsa bowls to wine bottle holders, clocks to lampshades, surprises the public.

What inspires me? Truth is I'm financially motivated. To my own astonishment I've grown to love this lifestyle, and I love living on the boat.



Everyone who owns one knows what that entails financially, and in these economic times artwork is not high on people's list of priorities. This is where the struggling artist part comes in.

Ken has joined me in this creative venture and I remind him that we've actually upgraded from starving, so that's progress. When things get really tight, that's when we become particularly creative: early results on a line of handbags indicate this just might be our pet rock. I do murals when and where I can, even on *Ruff Life's* transom, and I'm slowly experimenting with wall art.



Several of my pieces have won awards in international competitions, and my self-styled website's climbing the charts. No one's more surprised than me. I figure I'm far ahead of where I'd be if I had waited until retirement (or if I'd known in Florida that trawlers came with two engines). I now admit that moving on to *Ruff Life* has been one of the best decisions of my life. The journey has been incredible, and I don't just mean the cruise. ☺