

COMMUNITY PROFILE:

With All the Fiber of Her Being

Susannah Kiss, Fiber Artist

BY EUAN BEAR

JOHNSON – Although it's right in the middle of Main Street, River Muse Yarns is not the easiest place to find in this small college town near the center of Lamoille County. First find Roo's Natural Foods in the pale yellow Victorian on the south side of the street (about halfway between the Grand Union and the Mobil station on the way out of town), then head upstairs to the tiny one-room shop, staffed by owner and fiber artist Susannah Kiss (pronounced "Kish").

People walking in the hallway do the classic, exaggerated double-take as the head-turning profusion of colors and textures catches their eye.

Don't let the yarn-shop billing confuse you: this is not your grandmother's yarn store. There are rayons and silks and chenilles, mohairs and ribbons, most hand-painted or hand-dyed. Samples of Kiss's own designs for jackets, camisoles, boas and handbags adorn the walls. A small crocheted pot made of silk yarn holds a few hand-carved knitting needles on her antique desk angled to catch the light from the room's lone window.

The yarns are from Russia, Nepal, New Zealand, and Vermont. Some, like those from Peace Fleece, have a cause attached to them: Baghdad Blue's proceeds go to promoting peace in Israel. Others are made from recycled fibers.

But most important to Kiss is that they are beautiful.

"I don't carry yarns because they're from Vermont. I carry them because they're beautiful. Only beautiful things come

through the door. There are no fillers here," the white-haired proprietor explains. "If you use a beautiful fiber, whatever you make will be beautiful."

She demonstrates with a simple scarf – no complicated knit-purl patterns – made from a luscious vibrant blue mohair-mix yarn. The variations of color impart a riveting drama to the beginners' garment.

Kiss is a retailing veteran, having spent most of her adult life "fluctuating between non-

points out. The store pays for itself with yarns ranging from "kitten mohair" at \$5.20 per skein to Cherry Tree Hill yarns at \$40 ("but that's not expensive because you get so much yardage") for 500-yards of hand-painted brushed mohair, to Ellen Cooper's Yarn Sonnets at \$32 per 72 yards ("which just blows out of the store").

And now she's building a clientele among the staff and students of the Johnson Studio School, many of whom are using the yarns

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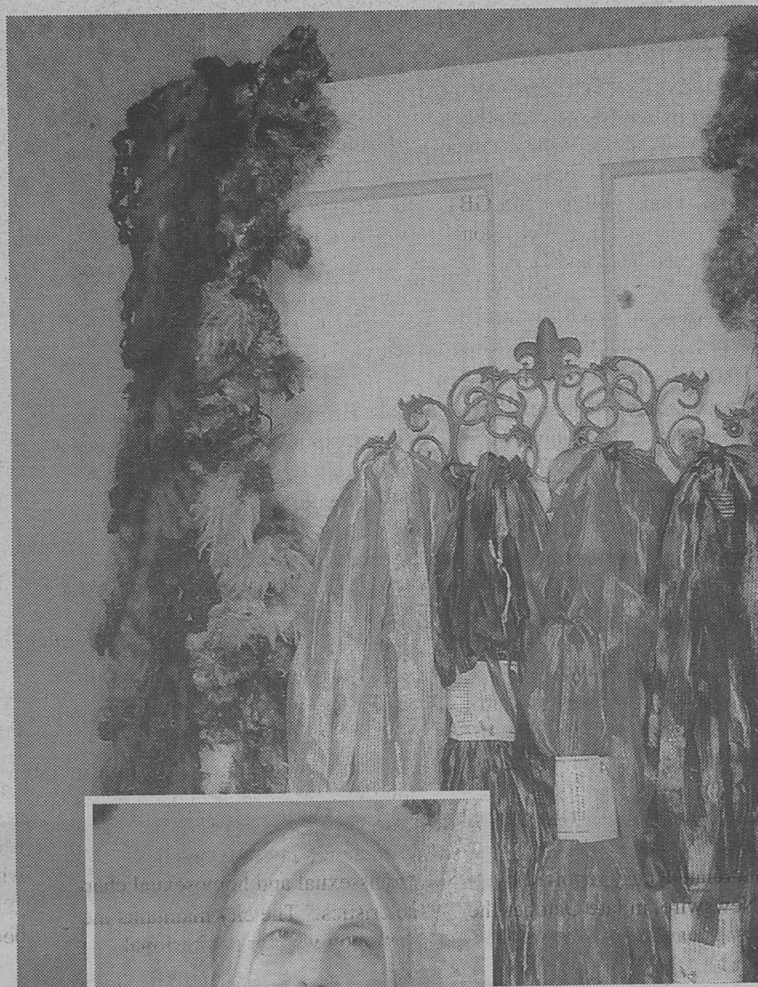
profit agencies and upscale retail." She's worked in bridal shops and clothing retailers in downtown Burlington, then spent six years working for Vermont Adult Learning. After moving out to Johnson, she spent two of those years commuting from Johnson into Burlington at or before the crack of dawn with her partner of eight years, Cindy Peterson, who owns a wallpapering business. "I loathed commuting," she growls. She does not drive and now lives a scant quarter mile from her shop.

The trade-off for the less-than-obvious location and lack of a storefront window is low rent. The store, she says, "was and still is a gamble. We're in a village of 3,000 in northeastern Vermont." By keeping it small, she doesn't need employees, she

to create dramatic artworks.

Kiss herself has had her work shown at the Helen Day Art Center in Stowe and the Artisan Gallery in Waitsfield. "Yarn is my passion, my obsession," she declares, adding, "I'm into 'drape,'" as she points to the long camisole and kimono jacket outfit she designed with a narrow boa trim. The trim, she explains, creates a "three-dimensional presence; the rest is just flat." She did a long camisole because "I don't like crop tops, I don't care how young and beautiful you are."

Besides the yarn, she says, "I'm also selling a lot of my finished work, which astonishes me. It wasn't in my business plan." As we talk, Kiss is winding a skein of handpainted mohair yarn ("the color of



Susannah Kiss (left) and some of her boas and yarns (above).

speak to a lot of young people who tell me they grew up with TV, VCRs, computers. There's a whole generation behind screens

with no tactile experience. A lot of them are really craving it."

Women in their 40s and 50s have, she says, finally escaped the stigma attached to knitting and crocheting in the early 1970s as "women's work" or "arts and crafts." Kiss teaches individually those who wish it, because "everyone learns in a different way."

What the fiber mavens and novices alike will find in Susannah Kiss and River Muse Yarns is a treasure trove of knowledge, inventiveness, patience, and artful and unusual resources, whether their project is a practical garment, wearable art, or a wall hanging. ▼

More and more women of all ages are coming back to knitting and crocheting, she declares. "I

Molly," one of her cats) into a ball before beginning a new project.

River Muse Yarns is located at 2 Lower Main East in Johnson. The shop phone is 635-9851.