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tucson
MEET OUR
makers

Hey 2023. It's nice to meet you. Here in Tucson, we are excited for all this year promises to bring. Like, for instance, the debut of 145-room boutique hotel **The Leo Kent** in downtown Tucson this spring. Interested in learning more? Click on the What's New link below.

Now, to meet Tucson's own Carly Quinn - not to be confused with superhero Harley Quinn - though Carly is just as much of a badass in our approximation.

[What's New](#)



Meet Carly Quinn of Carly Quinn Designs

From the outside, **Carly Quinn**'s unassuming studio in the heart of Tucson's Barrio Viejo neighborhood looks like any other house on the block. Step inside and you'll be blown away by the colorful tiles that line the walls: everything from animal faces and saguaro-studded landscapes to her favorite Moorish style peacocks – the subject of her first tile project in 2011.

This is 38-year-old Carly's sanctuary – a place where she's both an artist and businesswoman, selling personally designed individual tiles and carefully composed murals, like the 350-pound custom one that's being carried out by two men when I arrive.

"You're like the Michael Jordan of custom tile work," I tell her when I see the massive mural with religious overtones – what I liken to the tree of life. She laughs halfheartedly at the star-studded comparison, as if the metaphor overstates her abilities. However, the more time I spend with Carly, the more I realize how apt it is: Carly is a rare combination of raw, self-cultivated artistic

talent mixed with discipline and unforgiving drive. How else would someone who has never taken a ceramic class end up selling her pieces in a Restoration Hardware catalogue less than a decade into her career?

Carly's path to owning a tile business began unconventionally in 2011. She was working as a graphic designer when fellow artist Kris Selby taught her how to craft tiles using the centuries old Cuerda Seca technique. This technique is especially laborious, and incorporates transferring customized silkscreen designs onto terracotta tiles, painting silica-based ceramic glazes on the silkscreen, then baking the tile in a 2,000-degree kiln, allowing the wax to burn off and the color to set in. The end result: brilliantly colored tiles with a raised, smooth texture.



Carly had such a knack for crafting the tiles that what began as a side hustle on nights and weekends, turned into a full-fledged business within just a few short years.

"I remember when I had earned enough money to buy my own kiln," Carly says

of her success story. “At that point, I knew I couldn’t work for someone else. I needed to be the master of my own destiny.”

Today, Carly Quinn Designs has grown from one kiln into four, and what began as a solo endeavor is now a thriving business with 7 employees.

All parts of her business are conducted from her 1,700 square feet studio, which on the day of my visit is filled with women who are painting tiles. When I point out that her staff is exclusively women, she corrects me – she employs one male, he’s just not there that day.

Carly walks me through the design center and the “world’s smallest” shipping and receiving department, before taking me out back to the patio where the kilns are situated. Collectively, they run five days per week, firing between 500 and 1,000 tiles.

That’s because Carly’s multi-prong tile business is in high demand. Most of her sales are from wholesale contracts, including one she has with HMSHost, the world’s largest food and beverage service provider in airports. That contract resulted from her waiting outside the company’s headquarters until someone allowed her admittance so she could display her tile work. The company fell in love and agreed to feature her tiles in two airport gift shops. That relationship has since blossomed, and today, her tiles are in 30 HMSHost airport gift shops.

She also sells some of her tiles on Etsy, Instagram and Shopify – where her house number tiles, among other designs, are all the rage.



Then there's the custom tilework facet of her business. These projects range from the aforementioned religious mural to what she refers to as a "retro cactus" composition she's exceptionally proud of – both slated for residences – plus larger projects like a commission she's working on for the city of Pomona, California. For the latter, she's partnered up with local Tucson artist Steve Farley to create a series of murals called the "Faces of Pomona" that will be featured in the city's light rail station. Steve has drawn the designs for the series and Carly is crafting the tiles.

The last prong of her business – fine art – is what excites Carly most about the future. In the coming years, she'd like to grow this segment more, she tells me.

To illustrate what her fine art looks like, she guides me to a dramatic mural of a hawk that is preparing to take flight. The colors on the wings are comprised of several hues of blue, and the breast and head are a mixture of bold reds and oranges.

“Color blending is my favorite part of the creation process,” she tells me as she points to the wings. “There’s a real artistry to getting it just right.”

As the demand for Carly’s business continues to grow, she’s reminded that the size of her studio is a major limiting factor in amplifying her production. But for now, she’s content staying where she is, nestled in the heart of Barrio Viejo.

“I’m proud to be part of this historic neighborhood,” she says. “The community has really embraced my business and for that I’m exceptionally grateful.”

It’s no wonder why – Carly’s commitment to keeping the handmade tradition of Cuerda Seca tilework alive is a gift not only to the locals who frequent her shop, but to all who behold her stunning artistry.

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