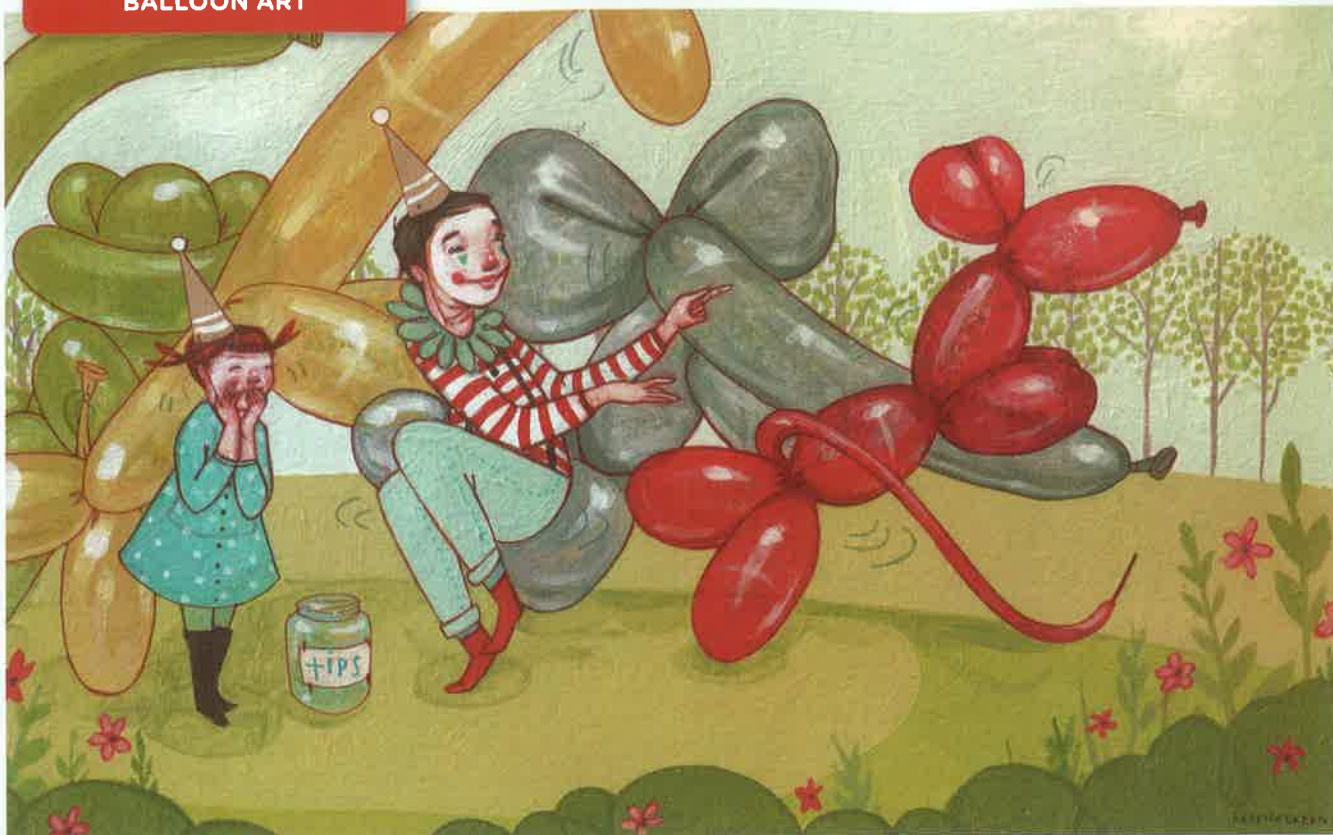


BALLOON ART



Twist and Shout

Professional **BALLOON ARTISTS** weigh in on their quirky — and rewarding — profession.

I WATCHED AS THE WOMAN TWISTED A BROWN balloon into the sausagelike links that would form the center of my balloon sunflower, impressed with her dexterity and slightly terrified of hearing a piercing “POP!” She’d approached my husband and me while we were eating brunch at The Frisco, one of our favorite greasy spoons in Austin, Texas, and where we often had noticed a balloon artist blowing and folding balloons into things like poodles, swords, aliens in spaceships and, yes, sunflowers, for customers, free of charge. “The secret’s in not filling them so much that they’ll burst,” she says.

I’d always thought balloon art seemed like a nice way to keep kids entertained while they waited for their pancakes. But this week, there weren’t many little ones around, and I was feeling the cheerful effects of an especially warm, sunny Sunday morning — so I said yes when she asked if I wanted a balloon. Her name was Cathy, she revealed, and she suggested making the sunflower, which turned out to be a pretty complex piece. In fact, it took her a solid 10 minutes to put it together while standing

at our table. Not engaging her in conversation for all that time as we ate eggs and home fries seemed not only rude but totally awkward too. So I started asking questions.

“How long have you been doing this?” I query.

“Eight months,” she replies.

“What’s your most complicated piece?”

“A sunflower.”

“Is there a book or something that taught you how to do this?”

“I work for a children’s-party company, and they send us to different classes to learn different skills.”

It was about this time that Cathy put the final twist on the leaves of her 3-foot-tall sunflower and handed me the floaty masterpiece. Impressed with the final result, I thanked and then tipped her. And while she was the only balloon artist I’d ever had a conversation with, I couldn’t help but wonder how others like her got involved in the profession — and what kept them twisting.

Some balloon artists choose the profession for fun, others to earn money. But they all have one thing in

common: their desire to spread good cheer and to make people laugh. "Balloon-twisters are close to clowns, and many often do clown too. So they tend to be funny," says Lanna Lee Maheux, a balloon artist in Westbrook, Maine, who got her start in 1989 as a clown at a local Ground Round Grill & Bar restaurant, where twisting was part of the job. "Maybe it's because of doing so many kids' parties, so there's always lots of silly jokes. Kids would usually ask for basic things, like dogs, but it was always fun to make the moment special when you'd hand them your creation." In the early 1990s, Maheux even ran into author Stephen King and his son. (King asked Maheux to make something cool, so Maheux made a cat. "I was very nervous, and his preteen son wasn't impressed!" she says.) Though she eventually tired of clowning, Maheux loved performing and struck out as an independent balloon artist, continuing to work at restaurants, corporate events and parties to make extra money.

Others, like Josh Routh, start twisting as a hobby. At 12 years old, he was a troubled kid

TWISTING 101

A dog is one of the simplest balloon sculptures, says St. Louis-based balloon artist Thad James, and anyone can learn to make one. Try these simple instructions from BalloonHQ.com — it's where all the pros go — and find plenty more tips on twisting and sculpting.



STEP ONE:

Inflate your balloon (a hand pump makes it easy), leaving the last four inches of the tail end uninflated, and tie it. As you twist the balloon, air will move into the tail.



STEP TWO:

Fold the balloon about six inches from the tied end so part of the balloon is sitting alongside itself.



STEP THREE:

To make the ears, gently squeeze both portions of the balloon about two inches from the fold and twist. Rotate the twist two to three times to secure it.



STEP FOUR:

Fold your balloon about an inch below the twist that formed the ears, and twist in a circular motion to form the front legs.



STEP FIVE:

To make the back legs, make another fold two inches away from the twist that formed the front legs, then twist. Your dog is complete!

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who also struggled with learning disabilities, and his mother was attending school to become a social worker. One of her electives was a class on clowning and, lacking child care, she brought Routh along. "The teacher started teaching me balloons, and I got obsessed. I started going to nursing homes and hospitals, and as I got into my later teens, I began doing events around the country," he says. Now 35, he owns and operates Circus Kaput, a St. Louis-based entertainment/party company offering balloon artists, magicians, jugglers, face painters and more.

As the balloon artist at The Frisco told me, not overinflating balloons is key to successful twisting, but there's more to being a great balloon artist than sharp technical skills. Almost as important is managing a line of customers at a party or event — and knowing how to keep those customers happy while they wait. "Often, while I'm making a balloon for one person, I'll ask the next person in line what they want," Routh says. "They won't always know right away, but they know that they need to start thinking about it."

Ballooning in the Big Apple

SINCE ARRIVING in New York City in 2003, Brooklyn-based balloon artist **Todd Neufeld** has built balloon hats and sculptures at corporate parties, crafted balloon wedding dresses, worked with a Parisian photographer on an Americana-themed balloon photo shoot (complete with a balloon American flag, hot dog and rocket ship) and even formed a local balloon-artist organization called **NY Twisters**.

"This is for sure one of the greatest cities in the world, and there are constantly cool things happening. And there's always room for another balloon person, whether for a window display or a grand opening or something on stage," he says. The only constraint? In a city where everyone travels by foot, subway or taxi, hauling a kit filled with 85 types of balloons plus a giant air pump to events simply isn't possible. "If I lived in a different city, I could keep everything in a car and roll out a giant display. But here, I have to be picky about what I bring, because

I always have to pack it up and carry it," Neufeld explains.

But in a way, those limitations are actually a plus, since they always force Neufeld to think creatively. And that's something that's symbolic of life as a whole for an artist in New York City, where everyone thinks they've seen it all. "When you live in New York, you can't believe your own hype. It's impossible to become arrogant in a city where so many talented people live, so there's always that balance of feeling humbled — and also feeling encouraged to do better," Neufeld says. "If I don't constantly push the envelope, I'll become irrelevant."

His latest endeavor? If you're headed to the Big Apple (and have the kids in tow), we suggest checking it out for yourself: Neufeld's new monthly variety show, **Little Laffs**, mixes juggling, balloon art, music, comedy and more on the first Sunday of each month at the **Jalopy Theatre in Brooklyn**. Learn more at www.littlelaffsny.com.



Two models in front of one of Neufeld's inflated creations



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