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Where Women Create

INSPIRING WORK SPACES OF EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN

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CELEBRITY WEDDING PLANNER & DESIGNER **DAVID TUTERA**

the BUSINESS of the STUDIO



COLLEEN ATTARA STUDIO

CURATED BY JEN O'CONNOR

Colleen Attara is a greeting card art designer, a mixed-media artist, an affirmation maker, and always a treasure hunter. She gives people the words to articulate their feelings so they can reach out to people they care about. She sees possibilities in the pieces left behind and shares them through the art she creates in a tiny cottage she rents in Yardley, Pennsylvania.

KNOWING THE BUSINESS

I was always very creative. I worked for years in sales as a television account executive in Philadelphia for ABC-TV and FOX-TV linking advertisers and the station. I was used to the word “no” and did not take anything personally. I left the corporate world to spend time with my children. When I was at home with them, we would make a lot of art and do creative play together. I started taking fine-art classes when my daughter was in preschool and many made me leave my comfort zone.

I felt a huge pull toward a creative life. I think we are all creative and we can access it if we allow it and give it room ... I gave it a lot of room. I did not judge myself; I just played and eased into my discomfort. Eventually my own style broke through, and luckily I had a background that allowed me to look at my art as a business. I was not aiming at the masses; I was looking for people who liked what I did. I was confident in putting my vision of art out into the world. I started my business in 2008 and have been sharing my vision ever since. ➤



A COTTAGE WITH CREATIVE ENERGY

My cottage studio is an integral part of my creative business and is part muse and part canvas. The 237 acres surrounding my studio cottage have been farmed for hundreds of years. My neighbor is a vibrant community art center where classes and shows are always in progress. The energy of the past and present can be felt the minute you walk into my space.

I have been here eight years and the space has changed and morphed along with me. The cottage is about 450 square feet and has three rooms and a bathroom. When I first rented this cottage, I was starting a permanent installation that was 70 feet long and created from salvaged business signage for Capital Health Medical Center in Hopewell, New Jersey. Fast-forward eight years, and I'm designing a line of greeting cards. As an artist, my focus shifts from project to project, and this cottage shifts with me. Within the next month, I will be sewing together an altered book quilt that I created as part of a grant with 180 middle schools, finishing a commissioned three-dimensional mixed-media painting, packaging orders, teaching a workshop, and designing new cards!





HEALING & INSPIRATION THROUGH ALTERED BOOKS

After a long illness, my mother died nine years ago. There were many days when there were no words to say, so I would use other people's words. I had read her Sue Monk Kidd's "The Secret Life of Bees," just before she passed away, so I began to alter the pages of this very book. I used paint and paper, and hand-sewed each page. I wrote down my thoughts quickly without overthinking them. These pages healed me and gave me a place to process the pain, loss, and love I felt. I was asked to share this experience in a London medical bereavement journal and I also wrote about my journey on various blogs. Elizabeth Duvioler, Founder of Squam Art Workshops, then asked me to teach at a retreat, which opened up a whole new world for me.

I now teach small, intimate workshops at my studio and give people places to process and hold their stories. I teach others not to overthink and how to move forward instinctively so their hands are working intuitively. It is amazing what comes out of this process. ➤

This is the very first altered book I created, made from the book I read to my mom. This book was the start of many healing pieces of art I would share with the world. I feel like I am holding a bit of her in these pages. I still add bits and notes into the pockets. I would grab this first in a fire.

TIPS FOR FELLOW ARTFUL ENTREPRENEURS

1. LET PEOPLE IN. YOU CANNOT GROW AND CONTINUE TO DO EVERYTHING YOURSELF.

Working with other talented people allows my business to run more smoothly and easily. I work with a web designer for my marketing and branding; she is invaluable. I also shared an assistant with a close artist friend of mine; this allowed us to hire someone with a great skill set and make sure she always had enough work. My most recent addition is an office manager who is also a personal organizer; she's always rethinking my workspace as I change and evolve.

2. DO NOT TAKE THINGS PERSONALLY.

If someone does not respond to an email, assume they are busy and politely check back in. It's not productive for your business to be impacted personally by these types of things.

3. ALIGN YOURSELF WITH OTHER BUSINESSES THAT ARE LIKE-MINDED.

I work with plastic fabricators who care about reusing materials. They are always saving materials for me that I cut my hand-scripted salvaged words from. They make me work smarter and better because our priorities are the same, and they understand and respect how I work.

4. BE REAL AND AUTHENTIC IN ALL ASPECTS OF YOUR BUSINESS.

Marketing is who you are and how you live. My brand works for me because it is true. I love to reuse creatively and that is in every part of my life. My packages ship with hearts that I cut from correspondence, art, and mistakes. I rip up catalogs and make collages on each box, and I handwrite a note on everything that ships. My past four summer vacations have been mission trips to a village in Freeport, Bahamas, where I turn trash into art with a group of teens (including my daughter). Figure out what you believe in and live it.

5. MEET OFTEN WITH A FELLOW CREATIVE WHOSE BUSINESS IS NOT COMPETITIVE WITH YOURS.

I have had a relationship like this for four years with Heather Davulcu of April Heather Art. We know each other's business like we know our own. I think our meetings have been a really big contributor to our growth.



REUSING WHAT'S LEFT BEHIND

I have always been fascinated with the pieces left behind; I think it is part defiance and part optimism. There is an inner part of me that loves to root for the underdog, as if to shout to the world, "You don't see beauty here? Let me show you what I see." I am constantly drawn to the past. I think things find me that are supposed to be in my artwork.

I am very intuitive and believe that my body and soul know things before I am conscious of them. For example, I desperately wanted to learn to sew on paper — it was a strong pull. I sensed I needed this skill to move on to the next chapter in my creative life. I learned basic sewing and how to use a sewing machine, and now I have a card line that is entirely sewn together. The wild stitches and loose threads are some of the best parts of my work.

I also use my own writing for my line, but there are no quotes — these words are inside me. Some of the words have been there all along in old journals and letters I wrote, while others come to me daily as I slow down and process what is happening around me. We have everything we need already.

A PLACE TO DREAM, CREATE & DO BUSINESS

This little stone cottage, and how I have decorated it, is like a mascot. My studio is full of ephemera: watch parts, old letters and postcards, stamps, vintage earrings and hardware, buttons, beads, etc. It is as if this little space was meant to hold these treasures and my creativity. It is a dream to create here and I keep it simple. On top of a portfolio behind a colorful curtain sits a tiny refrigerator that has coffee, cream, cheese, chocolate, tomato soup, and red wine — studio staples!

I think having a studio outside my home adds to the validity of what I do. It gave my business a face that was in line with how I create. It provided me with a space so people could look at and purchase my work where it is created. I love that I preserve a little bit of history by sewing ephemera onto paper and altered book pages while being surrounded by good energy that has been flowing through my cottage for more than 200 years.

I have shown my cards and prints at the National Stationery Show in New York City's Javits Center four times. Each year I bring my studio furniture into my booth, which really makes an impression. The colors of the walls change each year, and how I display my cards also changes as the line grows. But, the feel of being in my studio doesn't change. I am so comfortable in my booth because I am sitting in the familiar, funky chairs I create in around a red mid-century Formica table with ladders and vintage luggage. I take different pieces of my studio with me each year. I think this gives people an intimate look at who I am as an artist.



WHAT'S NEXT

In the future I would love to share my altered book process with others, which has continually healed me. I use everything that is accessible when I create, and I want to share the message that we have everything we need inside us. I would also like to license my artwork with a company that shares my values so I can get my messages and images on more products that are part of people's everyday.

WHERE WOMEN CREATE would like to thank Colleen Attara for her involvement in our winter issue. To learn more, visit colleenattara.com.

Photography by Jen O'Connor. Learn more in *Traveling Companions* on page 134.