

Astoria artist blends humanity with fungi

Carpenter hopes to expand art pursuits in the community

BY CHANCE SOLEM-PFEIFER

Fittingly enough, Jaz Carpenter's mushroom art tends to sprout.

The Astoria-based illustrator touches a stylus to the blank base of her iPad and begins drawing upward. A character's cartoon feet appear, then an outfit takes shape. By the time she's reached the character's neck, a stem replaces the human anatomy, followed by a mushroom cap for a head.

While Carpenter's drawings vary by color and proportion, she has applied her signature anthropomorphized mushroom style to characters famous, local, fictional and personal. Peruse her Instagram or Etsy store and you'll find Jimi Hendrix with a morel head, Astoria disk jockey JDuB with headphones slung around his stem and a bestselling piece inspired by Carpenter's grandmother.

"How mushrooms are, how people are, they correlate in my brain," Carpenter said. She sells her drawings under the moniker Jaz North Coast.

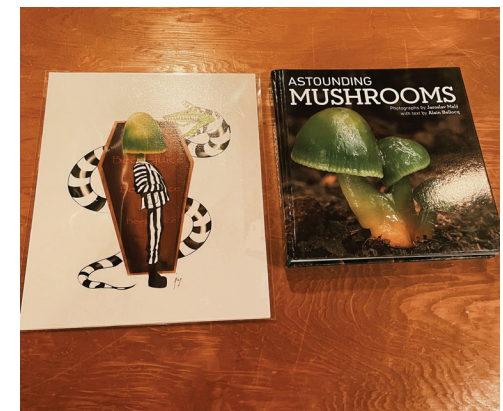
Carpenter operates out of the mushroom-themed shop Foragers, which she co-owns with Kirsten Norgaard of the neighboring Kit's Apothecary. The basement hideaway is decorated with Carpenter's work as well as other mushroom decor.

For Carpenter, a foray into this niche came about serendipitously. She moved to Astoria from Portland in 2019, and by the following year her time was split between mushroom foraging and puzzles. One fateful day's puzzle depicted Alice from "Alice in Wonderland" riding a caterpillar, launching Carpenter down a rabbit hole of creativity. Her first illustration depicted Alice, armless with a mushroom head, hitching a ride on that same caterpillar. Though Carpenter had worked around artists for much of her professional life in the music industry and tattoo parlors, this creative expression was a first.

"I had kind of lied to myself into thinking I would only work on a logical front and would not work on the artistic side," Carpenter said, "that was for them, and they were talented, and I shut that whole side out and never gave it an opportunity."

But the accessibility of digital drawing coupled with time for creative freedom fed this new passion until it grew into a profession. All the while, for Carpenter, mushrooms took on a symbolic meaning.

"Knowing how mushrooms pop up



Photos by Chance Solem-Pfeifer

LEFT: Artist Jaz North Coast works on a drawing. **ABOVE:** Artwork by Jaz North Coast.

through adversity and create an environment to help themselves and those around them to survive, I couldn't help but associate it with the people around me in quarantine," Carpenter said.

Fungi also factor prominently into another of the artist's forays — mural painting. They're front and center in the Astoria-themed mural she recently completed for the Labor Temple. She hopes to expand this practice as well.

"I'm really hoping to do more large-scale paintings around town. That's become my new dream I didn't know I had," Car-

penter said.

Beneath her muse lies an ironic secret — Carpenter is allergic to mushrooms. So while she can't safely testify to their taste, she seeks them out constantly for artistic inspiration. The best wild subjects, she says, appear to be "at play" — sudden splashes of red or gold she discovers in their beds of earth. Then, she gauges their personality and tries to imagine a human corollary, be it a skateboarder or an entire mushroom family.

As for upcoming projects, Carpenter is conceptualizing a pipe-smoking 1920s

mushroom and maybe Willy Wonka after that. But these are the quiet months both for foragers and at the shop. Carpenter can afford to spend a little time dabbling at the ferns of a new mural on her shop wall. If all goes well, giant fungi will overtake the mural's foreground as she paints, sweeping Foragers' visitors into Carpenter's world and blurring the lines, as her art does, between humanity and fungi.

"I want people to feel like they are small when they're around it," Carpenter said of her mural in progress, "like a mushroom's view of a mushroom."