

hidden
TREASURES

With these artful surprise balls, it's not only what's on the inside that matters—the outside is rather spectacular, too

Text by CHANTAL LAMERS *Photographs by* AYA BRACKETT





This page and opposite: Anandamayi Arnold fashions exquisite surprise balls in her Berkeley studio—her old bedroom in her parent’s house.

FOR ANANDAMAYI ARNOLD, crafting hundreds of curious surprise balls each year requires a vivid and substantial inventory of crepe paper, miniature folk toys, and boxes of throwback candies. The decorative bequests are so remarkable, the recipients may be hesitant to unearth their contents.

The Berkeley artist isn’t the earliest architect of surprise balls, yet she’s elevated the craft beyond its kitschy incarnation. It’s believed that a southern-based company popularized the novelty balls mid-century with the slogan, “The Toy You Destroy to Enjoy.” While the presentation has evolved, the idea is the same: 10 teensy treasures, individually wrapped in yards of multicolored streamer paper, swaddled into one neat ball.

Where Anandamayi’s interpretation differs is that for her, the toy- and treat-filled ball is only the beginning of the process. The ball becomes the foundation for an elaborate and often realistic crepe paper sculpture: from sea anemones with flowing tentacles to perfectly textured lemons dangling from floral vines that look so genuine you’d swear one bite would produce a mouthful of tart juice.





A special German crepe paper is essential to Anandamayi's highly accurate and detailed work.

Opposite: The unraveled pieces reveal a trove of sweets and little toys.

While the balls are considered Americana, her technique is rooted in traditional Japanese paper-doll making, trompe l'oeil, and historical costume design. When she was 11, a trip to the Japanese Cherry Blossom Festival in San Francisco led to three years of doll-making classes. Her mother drove her into the city every Saturday for sessions with Yuri Nakamura. "I think it gave me a feel for how to make paper be three dimensional," says Anandamayi. "Which I think obviously really influenced how I handle paper."

At the age of 15, she began making flower ribbons for Berkeley shop Tail of the Yak. After college (she majored in ancient studies at Brown University and took drawing and painting classes at the Rhode Island School of Design) she began working there. "My mom

said, 'You should make surprise balls for the store.' So I made some rabbits and brought them in. And ever since, they've kind of wanted me to do nothing else."

That was 15 years ago. Anandamayi now makes surprise balls exclusively for Tail of the Yak. The bounty reflects what she sees seasonally: bearded iris in the spring, plums in the summer, bright white snowballs and sparkly hunks of coal in the winter. They range in price from about \$25 for a geometric ball to \$39 for a pomegranate to \$90 for a bunch of waxed lilies. "It's amazing that I've sold thousands and thousands, and people keep wanting to buy them," she says. "I think in a way it's the perfect gift for someone who has everything because you're not responsible for what's in it."

Each ball begins with a collection of trinkets and treats that Anandamayi carefully composes. "It's supposed to be something I would like, but I appreciate a wide range of things," she notes. (A recent addition: brightly colored plastic warbler whistles.) As she wraps each toy in American-made paper streamers, she measures them against each other to ensure just the right shape when they're clustered together inside of the ball. What comes next is essential to the art: German crepe paper that another Berkeley store, Castle in the Air, imports.

"It's really all possible because of this wonderful crepe paper I use. It has amazing body, and because it's creped you can make non-linear



IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO UNRAVEL ONE OF ANANDAMAYI'S CREATIONS AND STILL SALVAGE THE *divine* PAPER SCULPTURE.





This page and opposite: Anandamayi's creations reflect what she sees seasonally in the garden, as well as at the farmers' market.

SHE'S *elevated* THE CRAFT BEYOND ITS KITSCHY INCARNATIONS.

shapes by stretching some parts and leaving other parts flat," she says, as she mashes and draws out the paper between her fingers. "You can make very supple botanical shapes with it."

She wraps and layers the ball, manipulating thin strips of crepe until she achieves the perfect shape and smooth coating. If she's crafting say, a pomegranate, she'll gingerly form and fasten the calyx with a few dabs of Tacky Glue. She moves on to the leaves, stretching, pulling and twisting until each is ready to be adhered to a stem of thread-wrapped florist wire. She pours a rich shade of red into her airbrush and sprays the piece. Once the stem is attached, a pomegranate suddenly sits in her palm. This all usually happens in fewer than 15 minutes.

With the exception of the daffodils, tulips, and lilies—where the bulbs act as the surprise ball—it's impossible to unravel one of Anandamayi's creations and still salvage the divine paper sculpture. Those who opt for the surprise are treated to a brilliant pile of colorful streamers, and perhaps a toy car, a ceramic whistle from India, a roll of Smarties candies, or a package of Swedish gummy fish.

There's no way to measure whose enjoyment is greater: those who savor or those who peel the paper away. Anandamayi is happy knowing that both groups exist. "I'm really glad that some people do and some people don't," she says. "I like the idea that they can get saved and seen, but it would be tragic if nobody ever opened them."

