



PHOTO BY JEREMY BANGS

Actress Pam Grier, right, and her sister Gina Grier-Townsie, sort through stock at Centennial-based Melting Pot Designs. The Griers strive to give Colorado artists a platform to sell their work.

Arts business keeps Pam Grier close to home

By Peter Jones
Staff Writer

It's a long way from Hollywood to Centennial, but actress Pam Grier has grown accustomed to change.

Since graduating from Denver's East High School in the 1960s, she has gone from a struggling actress working five jobs to becoming the virtual queen of a film genre.

In the 1970s, she brazenly fought off urban drug dealers on screen. Today, she quietly courts art dealers in the suburbs.

"People are surprised to know I have an entrepreneurial sense. I've always wanted to be in business," Grier said. "If my name helps get people in the door, then that's my job."

As of now, the door is a Web address — www.meltingpotdesigns.com.

The actress co-founded the online store with her sister, Gina Grier-Townsie, a Centennial-based graphic designer.

Melting Pot Designs puts a practical spin

on multi-cultural art. Most of the dot-com's catalogue is composed of products like stationery, clothing, handbags and baskets, to name a few.

Many of the artsy household items incorporate the work of Colorado artists, including painter Rod Grier, brother of the online retailers. His Southwestern paintings adorn several greeting cards.

Usable art, for lack of a better term, is seen by the Griers as a marketable commodity in ways that fine art can be a harder sell.

"Our major audience is women and they'd love to buy a painting, but if they saw this," Grier-Townsie said, pointing to a colorful shawl on her back, "they'd buy this instead."

The two sisters see Melting Pot Designs as a business with a mission. In an era that has seen school art programs slashed and painters and sculptors returning to their full-time day jobs, the venture is designed to give exposure to starving artists, literally.

"The most incredible gratification I've had so far is one of the artists saying, 'Because of you, we've been able to pay our rent this year,'" Grier-Townsie said.

Pam Grier accepts no profits from the company.

Melting Pot Designs began with a wake-up phone call from Gina while Pam was on location in England. Grier-Townsie had time to think. She was home on bed rest with twins.

It was triplets, if one counts her sudden brainchild, a late night delivery that cried out for Aunt Pam.

"Nobody in my family waits until morning," the actress laughed.

Grier-Townsie had to tell her bleary-eyed sister the news. Their joint venture would be a retailer for artists of all ethnicities and an accessible forum to sell their work.

Although locals have been the emphasis so

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far, Melting Pot Designs is now beginning to go national.

"Whether you're making moccasins in Wisconsin, to straw hats in California, to pottery in New Mexico, each region has a different type of art and culture," Grier said.

Supporting that American melting pot is a way for her to give back to the community.

"I've been so blessed to have a career for 30 years. We've always called it the pass-around in my family, you always share," she said.

The actress made her career mark as a major player in 1970s black action dramas, a genre often called "blaxploitation."

In hard-boiled movies like "Foxy Brown" and "Coffy," she played the streetwise sex symbol and appeared on the cover of *Ms.* She later posed nude for a men's magazine.

By the early 1980s, Grier's career had slowed down, though her fortunes increased a decade later, culminating in 1997, when she played the title role in Quentin Tarantino's "Jackie Brown."

Today she has a recurring

role on Showtime's "The L Word."

Grier has always preferred her roots in Denver to the bright lights of Los Angeles. Melting Pot Designs is another way to stay close to home and family. She lives in Douglas County.

The next step for the store will be to establish a physical location, likely in the Cherry Creek shopping district.

"It'll be nice," the actress said, "to have a gallery where you can actually come in and just listen to great music, whether it's classical or Tibetan drums, and have a latte and look at art and meet people."

Until then, Melting Pot Designs will continue to host semi-regular gallery shows in Denver, receptions Grier is happy to sponsor. The next one is scheduled in May.

The Griers believe art performs a necessary human function in the world, a universal need on par with food and air.

"There's countries," Pam said, "where you wake up, they have no food, no water, no plumbing, nothing over their heads, and still they manage to create art and decorate their bodies."



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Hand-painted flower pots are among the many "usable art" products available through Melting Pot Designs, the Centennial-based online store co-founded by actress Pam Grier.