

## C U R T A I N

EVERY FRIDAY

A Westport Artist's Unconventional Works Depict The Subordination Of Women To Their Husbands

## Marriage, Sliced And Diced

By OWEN McNALLY  
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**N**ina Bentley, an artist with a scalpel-sharp wit, loves to dissect the traditional concept of love and marriage with artistic gusto and Grand Guignol glee.

In "Unveiled," her provocative, darkly amusing exhibition at the New Britain Museum of American Art, the Westport artist slices through traditional greeting card sentimentalities and pieties about the eternal joy of matrimonial life. Her focus is on the injuries that men and women inflict on one other, all in the name of love, particularly in the sexist institution of marriage.

"The essence of the exhibition's message," Bentley says, "is that there is a cost to what we do. There is a cost to commitment. Behind the veil, behind the flowers, behind all that loveliness, there is a price to pay. I'm always looking for the twist. I don't paint beautiful flowers. I did that when I was 20," she says.

So instead of dealing with the pretty surfaces of things, the outgoing, 61-year-old artist creates works that symbolize the profound psychological and physical tolls wives have paid to make one-sided marriage commitments work.

Some pieces are strikingly odd; others are oddly beautiful. There are even lyrical touches in works that parody the sweetness and light of conjugal bliss by playing ironically on such sentimental objects as fancy wedding gloves, an old love letter or the forlorn looking eyeglasses of a departed loved one.

Bentley brings new meaning to the term "cutting edge" art. Her imagery cuts, slices and dices romantic notions by using such recurring symbols as hemorrhaging

hearts and ominously bloody, sharp knives.

Most of her sculptures are in a boxed format and installed on the wall. Called assemblages, the boxes serve as a dramatic stage or microcosmic world for her scenarios crafted to pierce through the veil of illusion shrouding risks inherent in commitment.

Most of the pieces are designed to disturb, but in an eerie, dreamlike way. The underlying sense of violence lurking in them is most often symbolic of the havoc sexual exploitation wreaks on the mind and spirit.

None of the knives are really about the sort of real-life physical carnage that made the O.J. Simpson trial such a mega-hit.

Bentley's surreal knives are lethal in a different, insidiously subtle way. They can

kill a wife's spirit,

or murder

her sense

of self. In

"Veiled

Threats,"

for

example,

Bentley

cloaks nine

scary blades

in gauzy,

virginal

wedding veils. Framing this lurid image — a representation of psychological death by a thousand cuts — is a rectangular array of vintage photos of 50 women. This rather dour-looking legion of the oppressed is memorialized here as walking-wounded victims of "veiled threats" in daily skirmishes in the war of the sexes.

Bentley gathers virtually all the material for her works by foraging through flea markets. She buys all sorts of castoff goods without really knowing how they will eventually fit serendipitously into one of her future projects. Her studio is cluttered with objects from daily life. Some are tossed into loose categories in her husband's old cigar boxes.

Materials for the New Britain show include old postcards, a statuette of a cherub, veils, gloves, aprons, all sort of curios and even, of all things, preserved moths. There are small photos of her, including one of her then-young housewife's face transferred onto the bottom of a flat iron in a piece humorously called "Eros Interruptus."

Despite the exhibition's sardonically grim view of marital commitment, Bentley says she is quite happy with her marriage and three children. "I'm still married to the same man after 40 years, and it's an intense relationship. My husband is a retired international banker. So I was a corporate wife, but I always pursued my passion for art. I always had a studio and always exhibited, including shows in Switzerland." But even in the most excellent relationship, commitment can mean some disquieting compromises along the way, she says.

"I experienced the life of an international traveler, and the life of an artist whose career was on hold as I prepared the dinner party," she says.

"Would I like to be Kiki Smith [a famous woman artist] hanging in the Museum of Modern Art? Yes. Would I give up any of my roles as mother and wife? No, I'm happy," she says emphatically.

So what motivated her to use her art to slash open the negative side of marriage?

"I'm sort of a social reformer. When I was a little kid, I was writing for the

**NINA BENTLEY'S** show at the New Britain Museum of American Art is devoted to the theme of male domination in marriage. The bloody knives in "Vows," top right, and "The Lean Years" symbolize the way marriage can kill a woman's sense of self. Bentley, incidentally, has been happily married for 40 years.

JOHN WOIKE/THE HARTFORD COURANT

school newspaper telling people not to make noise in the hall. This is sort of pointing a finger behind the veil of marriage. I would rather open people's eyes than give them another way to close them again."

Among the eye-openers, "Third Party" is the most visceral in the show.

It depicts three hearts in a sort of free-floating, odd ménage à trois. Two hearts on the perimeter are connected individually by stethoscopes to one womb-like heart in the center.

Even for Bentley, who thrives on multiple visual and verbal meanings, this work throbs with ambiguity.

Perhaps the heart-to-heart connection is about an extramarital affair. Or maybe it symbolizes a deep sense of betrayal, or the sharing with a third party of an intimate secret between husband and wife.

Stretched out on the floor are two large, sprawling sculptures whose meanings are much easier to grasp.

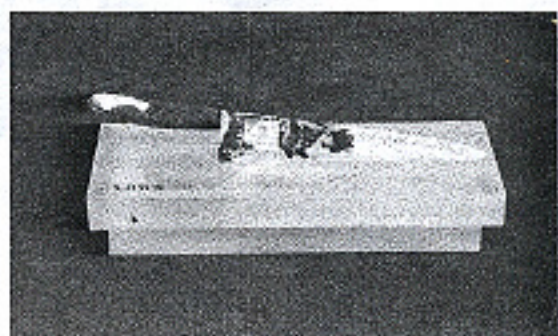
One consists of a giant chain called "Security Blanket," symbolizing a husband's financial support that could nurture, or enslave, or both.

The other floor piece consists of many shiny teapots strung together like a massive bracelet for a giant Wonder Woman.

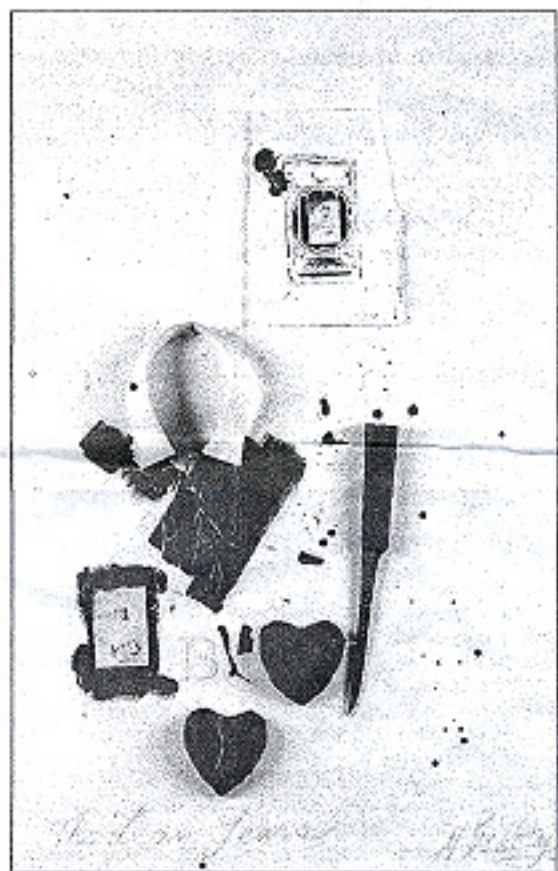
Called "Corporate Executive's Wife," it's dedicated to Lorna Wendt, the Stamford woman who made divorce-court history in the 1990s. Wendt demanded a 50/50 split with her multimillionaire, corporate executive husband as her fair share of their long partnership as man and wife.

"Lorna bought the first version of this piece and installed it in her home," Bentley says. "Her story moved me. When the judge asked her what right she had to half her CEO husband's assets, she replied, 'Well, I poured the coffee for all those years.' That's where the idea comes from.

"The bracelet is a tribute to the corporate wife who so often is the one who holds the



"VOWS"



"THE LEAN YEARS"

ladder as her husband climbs. She gets no gold watch after 25 years of devoted service. So the charm bracelet, with a silver teapot for each year of service, is my tribute to her contribution," Bentley says.

Bentley's astirical skills and knack for irony will be shown in all their often-gory glory through April 29 at the New Britain Museum's New/Now gallery. A subdued, clinical looking nook, the New/Now gallery provides just the right ambiance for Bentley's vivisection of marriage as a male-dominated institution.

The New Britain Museum of American Art is at 56 Lexington St., New Britain. Hours: Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday, noon-5; Wednesday, noon-7; Saturday, 10-5. Admission: adults, \$4; seniors, \$3; students, \$2; children under 12 and members, free. Free Saturday, 10 a.m.-noon. Information: 860-329-0257.