

The Whimsical World of Nina Bentley

BY JUDITH MARKS-WHITE

The scene is almost too perfect. There's the white picket fence framing a lush green lawn. The landscape boasts a winding brook from which ducks arrive on cue. A few loud quacks hardly invade the serenity here. Outside the white Colonial, it's all so picture postcard, so traditional New England — not the kind of place you'd expect artist Nina Bentley to live.

After all, she's the woman who not only dressed up like the Queen Mum, but also had photos of the occasion miniaturized and their edges perforated to look like stamps. She has made a clock from a horse's skull and a time-out chair that looks like the last stop on death row. And she finds room for artistic statements in all objects. Shoes for example. Shoes decorated to make a statement, like "A Platform Shoe" replete with female candidate, myriad American flags

and toy soldiers. She makes thought-provoking birdhouses and, to many, offensive assemblage boxes. Even coffee cups are her medium. Other times it's a frying pan, a refrigerator door, a cow (Cows on Parade, that is) and dolls' heads.

Avant-garde? No, outrageous is probably the best way to classify Nina's work. She's been described as someone born with the gift of laughter and a sense that the world is mad. The latter might sound like the pot calling the kettle black, two mediums she's undoubtedly used.

Regardless, Westporter Nina Bentley is a prolific and



unconventional artist whose work simultaneously astonishes and delights. Born in Brooklyn and raised in Great Neck, New York, Nina attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where she studied fine art and graduated in 1962 with a bachelor's degree in history. She has lived much of her adult life in Bologna, Frankfurt, London, Zurich, Santiago and Caracas.

In the 1980s, Nina worked as executive director of the Rye Arts Center. She has curated shows in New York and Connecticut, including "America", "Woman's Work", "Piece of Cake" and "Time's Up" for the Westport Arts Center, where she is a member of the board of directors. Her work has been exhibited widely since 1965, and she has had numerous one-woman shows in Europe and America.

In last spring's "Unwield" exhibition at the New Britain Museum of American Art, the theme of marriage was

explored. Nina, one of several chosen out of one hundred applicants, presented a collection of work portraying the relationship between couples in myriad ways.

"It is the most personal show I've ever done," the artist explains, "and my most risky." Risky because here she exposes deeper emotion than just social commentary. "This is closer to home," Nina says, adding, "It is home."

Douglas Hyland, the museum's director, explains that with this show, all the artists who were represented could do anything they wanted. ▶

artist's showcase



That was all Nina had to hear. An artist who uses visual expression to convey her feelings about her life and our society, she had a field day. Her work offered a glimpse into the many nuances of marriage and, for better or for worse, her pieces struck home.

"Corporate Executive Wife's Service Award Bracelet II", which Nina considers her most disturbing piece, is a bracelet consisting of twenty-seven silver-plated teapots representing each year of corporate service. It hangs on a heavy industrial chain and sits on a forty-two-inch pedestal. Inspired by Lorna Wendt, who won a \$20 million divorce settlement against her husband, Gary, a former General Electric executive, Nina comments, "Often the one who holds the ladder her husband climbs is the corporate wife." The New Britain Museum of American Art has made the bracelet part of its permanent collection.

"Veiled Threats" is an assemblage of kitchen knives holding up pieces of bridal veil surrounded by old sepia-toned portraits of women. "One Hundred Cuts" are slivers made by an X-acto knife on an antique organza apron. "Love, Honor and Obey" depicts a wedding cake couple inside a rough-surfaced shoe while a razor blade cuts the first slice of cake. In the background, a gold-plated winged statue holding

a heavy iron chain, is positioned behind the couple. Marriage, according to Nina, can be rough going.

Despite her often controversial messages of the dark side of marriage, Nina and her husband, Richard, have shared forty years of happy, though somewhat unconventional, matrimonial success. A former international banker turned teacher, he is the perfect yin to her yang.

"Richard and I are very different," she says. "He's more conservative. I'm more spur of the moment."

The artist grins as she recalls once showing up at a corporate dinner dressed in hot pants with a glass eye sewn onto a velvet ribbon around her neck. Another time, she attended a ball in a costume acquired at a thrift shop. Wielding her scepter and crown, she looked exactly like the Queen Mum and ended up with an award from the head of the Costume Institute of the Museum of Modern Art for best costume. That same evening, a gentleman approached her and said: "I absolutely love your outfit."

"And who are you?" Nina inquired.

"The British Consul General," came the reply.

"Yeah right, and I'm really the Queen Mum," she said, to which the Consul General said: "Take my card. When you sober up in the morning, you'll see that I was right."

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And he was.

Such moments punctuate Nina's world and add a *joie de vivre* to both her work and her life. As with the work she creates, in real life she continues to challenge the concept of partnership while she explores the nuances of relationships intended to last a lifetime. It is not without pain that Nina expresses herself through her work. Regarding "The Chosen" and "Monday's Child", the artist becomes pensive.

"The most important aspect of my life has been as a mother. Many years ago I experienced the death of a child. I never mourned that great loss because I was too busy getting on with my life and creating a good home for my other children."

Now, years later, as the mother of three grown children and grandmother to their offspring, she is brought face to face with a long-suppressed agony. "In this period of mourning through my art, I am moved by the pain of all loss of childhood and children."

It is her ability to transcend that pain and move into the whimsical that clearly defines Nina Bentley. "I create art to gain some perspective on the world while trying to retain a sense of humor. Often, my work is created in pursuit of social reform with tongue in cheek and a somewhat jaundiced eye."

And what is more evident of her humor than her recent exhibit that was on view April 19 to May 19 in international shoe designer Stuart Weitzman's Madison Avenue salon. Here is where Nina's whimsy comes alive. Her assemblage of shoes can be created only by a mind so steeped in irony that one cannot help but laugh aloud when witnessing these innovative sculptures.

Her shoes depict different themes. "For many years, my shoes have become my canvas, a pedestrian image that seems to fit," she says.

She has created a host of decorated shoes, including "Wedding Shoe" made up of flowers and spikes. "Till Death Do Us Part" is a shoe covered with pills and an assortment of medications. Her "Woman's Corporate Executive Climbing Shoe" shows women on their way up, while "Stepping Out With My Babies" combines nipples, plastic bottles and paint.

Indeed, Nina puts her heart and "sole" into her work. "Shoe Shi" takes Japanese food to an art form. Her "Crows Over Wheat Fields" (taken from Van Gogh's last painting) is a shoe stuffed with wheat that has small blackbird-like shapes springing from it. "Platform Shoe", wielding a female politician at the helm surrounded by American flags, ten-dollar

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bills and golden eagles, is a political statement where women's power cannot be ignored.

"There's more to making an artistic shoe than sticking things to it," Nina says. "If all you end up with is a heap of nails stuck together, you have not created art. You have to touch something beyond the shoe."

Her shoes, like so many of her other pieces, can be seen as multidimensional commentary tinged with irony. Stuart Weitzman liked them so much that he bought two — "The Platform Shoe" and "Garden of Eden" — for inclusion in his book.

In her studio, a few yards from the main house, Nina's creative energy takes hold. Here, clutter is an art form and materials are strewn about to be used whenever the mood strikes. Drawers spill over with old buttons, postcards, gloves and an assortment of curios and cherubs that will, ultimately, work their way into her creations.

Having moved to Westport six years ago, it is here Nina Bentley has found her private artistic paradise. It is here among the things she holds most dear that she can pursue her craft most effectively as she sets out to make a statement of her take on life. "I create art to gain some perspective on the world at large, trying as best as I can to retain some semblance of a sense of humor, something not always easy to accomplish," she explains.

Her themes are as unique and multidimensional as the artist herself. Clocks and boxes and drawings unfold at every turn. Clocks, in fact, are one of Nina's favorite themes. Along with graphic designer Miggs Burroughs, she curated "A Show of Hands: Working Clocks by Working Artists", which benefited First Night Westport/Weston 2001.

"One of the stipulations of the show was that each artist had to produce a working clock," she recalls.

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"Each clock and its title was provocative in its own way."

Needless to say, Nina Bentley herself is just as provocative and multifaceted. Her "Coffee Cup Series" deals with friendships broken, friendships lost and conversations with her friends. "Last Cup of Coffee With My Mother" is part of the artist's personal collection. Nina uses real people in her work. Her friends — Melanie, Edyth, Naomi, Rachel, Lunn and Bonnie — are women who have played important roles in her life. Similarly, they are represented in her "Coffee Cups and Conversation" series.

"I tend to revisit themes," the artist explains, yet her creations remain eclectic and original. At present, she is in the process of making "A Lemon" and "A Cattle Car" for the Stamford Art-A-Mobile exhibit.

Sauntering through her gallery of work and pausing in her upstairs hallway surrounded by colorful Ralph Lauren flowered wallpaper, a quiet and gentle Nina Bentley emerges. This petite woman whose mind is always working, and who breaks all the rules of conventionality, is half traditional, half funky.

Nina moves through her days with a vibrancy that can be found in all of her work. Whether it is "Cloning Around", "Blind Justice" (inspired by the O.J. Simpson case), or "Our Lady of Menopause" plate, here is proof that she is a communicator, always en route to finding answers through art.

In Nina's studio is a wooden box depicting a fish with strawberry-blonde hair.

"Whatever is that?" she is asked.

With a slight grin, but otherwise serious demeanor, the artist retorts without missing a beat: "Goldie Lox, of course."

Nina Bentley raises satire to an art form. And those of us lucky enough to be part of her whimsical world cannot help but be inspired. W