

BALTIMORE ... OR LESS

Finding beauty in the grate beyond

Bobbi Mastrangelo uncovers the art in manhole covers, with works in paper, collage, silk screen and sculpture.

By MICHAEL OLLOVE
SUN STAFF

When you're dodging a flying manhole cover, it may not be the best moment to appreciate its artistic merits.

Quite possibly, the beauty of a manhole cover would escape you even if you had infinite hours to contemplate it.

That may be why God gave us Long Island artist Bobbi Mastrangelo.

Mastrangelo's muse for the past 20 years has been neither the human form nor landscapes. She has mainly been interested in what is underfoot. Namely, the manhole cover.

Because manhole covers have popped into the air like champagne corks in Baltimore this summer, we have undoubtedly thought far more about the things than ever before. That is not the case with Mastrangelo. It's probably a safe bet that no one in the last 20 years has explored manhole covers in more artistic media than Mastrangelo.

She has represented manhole covers in paper, in collage, in silk screen, and in sculpture. Some of that work has been on display in the Baltimore Public Works Museum since 1995 in an exhibit called "Grateworks."

Mastrangelo's interest in manhole covers dates back to art school in New York, when a professor advised her to focus on either a particular theme or a particular style. Mastrangelo did not want to limit herself to a single form of artistic expression. She also did have a special affinity for one shape, the circle. When she happened upon photographs of manhole covers in an art history book, she realized that she had found her inspiration.

Why manhole covers?

"I just found them fascinating, especially the designs. The old ones in Europe and New York City incorporated beauty in the design."

And so, she set about re-creating images of those manhole covers in her artwork, capturing their textures, giving a sense of their weightiness, and portraying them as a gateway to mysterious and rich worlds.

Aside from the merits of the art, Mastrangelo believes her work also champions the underappreciated souls who labor in public works. "Those covers are an opening to a huge underground world of maintenance that allow us to survive. Most people take that for granted."

Now you may think Mas-



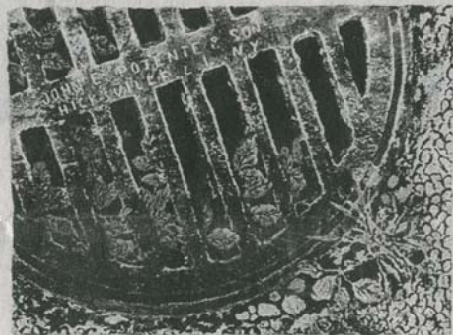
Heavy metal: "Three Sewer Hitter" explores the beauty in varying styles of manhole covers.

trangelo, a grandmother and elementary school tutor, would be a lone wolf crying into the night. But like Richard Dreyfuss obsessively creating a model of a mountain in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, many other artists — perhaps more than 200 of them worldwide — share Mastrangelo's fixation on manhole covers.

There are enough of them, in fact, that a pair of artists in Moscow recently created a Web site exhibit devoted to manhole cover art. The title of the exhibit (which includes several Mastrangelo pieces): "Sewers of the World, Unite!"

Mari Ross, director of the Baltimore Public Works Museum, says that every year, one or two local art students stop by to do rubbings from manhole covers to incorporate in their own artwork. And this year, an instructor at the Maryland Institute College of Art plans to take a class to the museum to discuss the manhole covers on display there, both the real ones and Mastrangelo's.

So, the next time a 350-pound manhole cover comes hurtling toward your head, you should take that moment to savor its form and artistry. Then you should duck.



Full circle: It was the shape that first attracted Bobbi Mastrangelo, left, to depict manhole covers in her art. Then, she liked the designs. Above, "John E. Potente & Sons."

