

GRATE WORKS

By Ray Ellis

“O_h

come on,” you might say, “Manhole Art? What’s the big deal?”

Maybe we all have become a little bit more skeptical of “art” with the anything-goes attitude of the recent Brooklyn Museum “Sensation” exhibit. There is, however, nothing inherently sensational about manhole covers. I mean, can we get any more mundane than access covers to sewer, water, gas, telephone, electrical and storm drain lines? A bump in the road, an occasional circle in the black expanse of asphalt is what you may think. But think again.

It’s Bobbi Mastrangelo’s passion-her artistic passion. Her art is manifested through circles, textures, color and design. It just so happens that manhole covers seem to be the subject of so much passion and creativity.



ARTIST WITH HER SCULPTURE, “TUTHILL STREET”
PHOTO BY RAY ELLIS

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GRATE WORKS CONT'D



Sculpture relief #197
Photo by Pat Colombraro

Working with wonderfully textured handmade papers, canvas and sculpted foam boards, Mastrangelo, a Port Jefferson resident, transforms the seemingly mundane (under foot or tire) covers, into intriguing designs that catch us thinking. “I never noticed how interesting manhole covers could be,” and then, “Which room or wall might look best with a manhole motif?”

Mastrangelo’s most recent exhibit of her manhole art is currently showing at the Omni Gallery in Uniondale, NY. With many other exhibits to her credit, the last one a year ago in the Prism Gallery of Port Jefferson, NY called “Grate Works,” her work is published and collected. Not surprisingly some of her collectors include the Baltimore Public Works Museum, New York City Fire Museum, Port Washington, NY Water District and the Suffolk County NY Water Authority. “Municipal workers just love my work because it relates to their jobs,” said Mastrangelo.

Many pieces of her work have been transformed into postcards bringing her into contact with postcard collectors around the world. The postcard showing Sculpture Relief, #197 is available in local stores in

Port Jefferson.

The inevitable question always comes up. Why manhole covers? Mastrangelo answers, “When I was studying art at SUNY, Stony Brook with printmaker Daniel Welden, he noted that I seemed to favor circular themes. About that time I came across a book of photos with several shots of manhole covers as design elements. I hit on it! I’ve always been interested in traffic safety and litter-free streets, and my art fit right in.”

Being out in the streets photographing or making rubbings of manhole covers energized her other passion for a clean environment. “I would often find covers littered with debris which I would sometimes collect and incorporate into my manhole sculptures.”

A founder of the Smithtown organization CLEAN, Committee for Litter Elimination and Neatness, she established herself long ago as a activist against litter and environmental pollution. Following this theme of manhole art and environmental awareness, one of her prints of a utility cover incorporates the found graffiti: “The children of tomorrow can’t love this world if we the people of today destroy its beauty before they even see it.....The Fabulous Five.”

Like Mayan calendar stones, Stonehenge rocks or Tibetan sand mandalas, the circle theme has an atavistic appeal. There is something intuitively satisfying and secure with the completeness of a circle, the promise of no beginning or end, and as Bobbi Mastrangelo sees it, a manhole cover works just fine for her life’s art theme, her mandala of municipal art.

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.....Bobbi Mastrangelo



Bobbi in her former studio Photo by Ray Ellis