

BOBBI MASTRANGELO

“ARTIST WITH AN ENVIRONMENTAL EDGE”

Interview by
Lynn Sanders Curley
Professor Mr. Tsontakis-Mally “The Mark of Art”

April 1997 CEI524

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"Hold fast to your dreams. Be persistent and patient. Even if no one believes in you, believe in yourself." Bobbi Mastrangelo, artist, environmental activist, poet, teacher, wife and mother, spoke these words to the audience as she was inducted into the Maryvale High School Hall of Fame in 1994 in Upstate New York. She had always loved art, but came from a large family and accepted a scholarship to attend SUNY at Buffalo to become an Elementary School Teacher. She married Al Mastrangelo in December 1958. After graduation in 1959, they moved to Long Island to teach. They raised their three children, Michael, Peter and Ann in St. James, NY.

In the 1970's Mastrangelo studied printmaking with Dan Welden working in lithographs, linocuts and woodcuts. Her work evolved to mixed media creations of collaged plates to print collagraphs and relief sculptures and finally artistic constructions. She now delineates her work in three periods. The “Classic Works” period was first and consists largely of circular prints and drawings. The themes are varied and many of the subjects are local scenes. She refers to the second phase as the Picasso Period or “Mod Works.” The third phase is Grate Works that are renditions of manhole and water covers made of foam board in a relief sculpture form.

Grate Works focus on manhole and water covers to challenge the viewer to appreciate the technology and maintenance of our public utilities, water conservation and environmental awareness. Mastrangelo loves to do research. In her quest for authenticity she has become an authority on manhole covers. But her work also serves as a call to action. The visual shock value is meant to depict the threat of disaster, which could occur from the depletion of these resources. Her art draws attention to the passage of time and the ongoing destruction of the environment. It is a plea to every individual to take an active role and stop the abuse before it's too late.

Her sculpture is visual, sometimes audible and often accompanied by her own poetry. The artist describes the support of her family on her work, Precious Waters. "My son, Michael, designed and engineered the special sound effects. It was especially amusing to observe him recording the blurp, blurp of boiling farina to simulate the gurgling sounds of hazardous waste. My son, Peter, proposed a base structure representing the strata below "Precious Water." My daughter, Ann, assisted in the “rock” creation. My husband, Al, is to be congratulated for his patience, as the whole house turns into an Art Barn during construction phases of my work. Seriously he's an encouraging art critic who also provides insight and ingenuity in solving technical construction problems."

In 1986 Bobbi Mastrangelo's concern for the environment led to the formation of a local grassroots organization, CLEAN, Committee for Litter Elimination and Neatness. CLEAN's Logo of crossed brooms and its slogan, "Adopt a Spot", encourage residents to keep a parking lot, intersection or

stretch of road litter-free. The group promotes beautification (with flowers and shrubs) and anti-litter education in the Smithtown Township.

I spoke with Bobbi Mastrangelo in her lovely home in Port Jefferson where she and her husband have lived for the last year surrounded by her art. She creates her artwork in an immaculate, meticulously organized studio in her home. Some of her work has found a permanent home in the collection of the Baltimore Public Works Museum in Maryland.

L.S.C. I am a proud owner of a beautiful print you did of the St. James Episcopal Church in St. James. "Who's Who in American Art" lists you as a printmaker first and a sculptural artist second? Do you consider yourself that way? Or are you first and foremost an artist?

B.A.M. An artist first, and then a printmaker. However I choose whatever medium will work a particular idea. Certain works just form in my mind as a print or as a sculpture. So I'm that kind of artist at that moment. Actually the seesaw between mediums is a safety factor. I have never spent too much contact time with any one solvent or product. Some of the solvents used to clean printmaking blocks and inking plates are actually hazardous to one's health. I have since discovered that the environmentally safe product: Goo Gone can be used to clean up brushes and inks. Some people are allergic to plastic or foam. Because I don't work with any one medium consistently, I haven't developed an allergy to those products.

L.S.C. It seems that most of your works now are three dimensional, sculptures.

B.A.M. Sculptures are my favorites. But I continue to create prints because they are more affordable for the average art patron.

L.S.C. Also the time?

B.A.M. Yes, sculptures are very time consuming. But they are originals, one of a kind.

L.S.C. How much time does it take for one of your large projects?

B.A.M. Well, with total dedication a sculpture could be completed in a month. It is difficult to attach a time line. So much planning and thinking are involved. I could be on the road and I'll think "Ah! That's the way I'm supposed to finish the back." I solve problems in the car while driving, like what kind of environment should surround the grate? or what is the message I am trying to convey?.

L.S.C. You have been quoted as saying that you were influenced by Pop Art. Daniel Welden puts your work in that category and in a 1989 article Marjorie Kaufman calls you a "Pop Artist". Do you concur and what exactly does that mean to you?

B.A.M. I think I fit in that category. A Pop Artist venerates a common object. So when I chose the manhole covers, common objects on the street and made them popular, I called them works of art. So that makes me a Pop Artist. But I am also one who shows concern for our precious resources. I add litter or stress preserving and conserving our water. So I call myself "The Pop Artist with an Environmental Edge."

L.S.C. Early in your career a professor suggested you adopt a theme for your work and he introduced you to a book of photographs of manhole covers. You then began making rubbings in New York City Streets. Who was that professor?

B.A.M. Actually my print making instructor Dan Weldon suggested I needed a theme. I was taking his class at Stony Brook University and he was a hard marker. I was a competitor, not satisfied with B's or C's. Every one of my projects looked like a different person had done it. Professor Welden said I needed an identity. He suggested that I choose one theme or a style. Because I enjoy different media I did not want to be locked into a style. A theme is what I need. Then I had a new challenge. What theme should I choose?

If anyone could advise me, it would be my art history instructor. Lawrence Alloway was a distinguished professor from Great Britain. I admired his eloquent descriptions and knowledge of modern art. He authored the book called American Pop Art. I took several little photo books of my art to his office. He looked at my rooster with the rising sun, the owl and the full moon, sunbursts, sunflowers and circular prints. Circles were always there, but I didn't even know it until he pointed out that circles dominated my art.

A few weeks later we studied the Minimal Artists whose sculptures are very bare and lean. I browsed through a book of Sol LeWitt's Minimal Sculptures. Lo and behold at the back of his book were two pages of manhole covers. Though they were unrelated to his work, he photographed them because they were works of interest to him around his city. He declared them to be art works unto themselves. Eureka! I thought. Circles! Common objects on city streets. What a perfect theme. I had no idea how much fun I would have with the manhole cover theme. It's really never ending.

L.S.C. Could you ever have anticipated then where you would be now?

B.A.M. No, no, because in 1979, I had only begun to experiment with grate designs. A library curator suggested choosing a single theme for the upcoming competition entitled, "New Art in New York" (NANY) to be held at Parson's School of Design. In 1984, I entered slides of three manhole cover prints. That's all I had done. If accepted, I would need 10 works in 2 months. Al said, "You are entering this show and you don't even have enough works for it?" I said "Don't worry, I won't make this show; it's a big competition." How surprised I was to receive the acceptance letter. I put on the steam and got busy doing manhole covers. I was accepted in NANY the next year too. In 1985, I met artists from around the country. The artists from metro New York introduced me to the National Association of Women Artists. I became a member and now my works are in their personal collection at the Zimmerli Art Museum. New Art in New York helped launch my manhole art career.

L.S.C. Did you really think you wouldn't make the NANY show?

B.A.M. Yes, it sounded like a pipe dream then. Now I look back and it's part of all the growth process. As a beginning artist having a theme was a fortunate move. And it was exciting to be in the city. The first year was a quiet show. Nobody sold much work, but we met wonderful people. I met The Leonardi's who later sent me the Brooklyn manhole covers rubbings. We have been friends ever since. So I made several friends from there and joined an association all because of the contacts and the networking at the New Art in New York Exhibitions.

L.S.C. In a 1988 N.Y. Times review of an exhibit at Discovery Gallery in Glen Cove, Helen A. Harrison called your work "graphically engaging". She posed the question, "Why construct an imitation when the original was as good, if not better?" Having seen so much of your work here, I don't think it's necessary to answer the question.

B.A.M. Tell me what you think.

L.S.C. They are not reproductions. They are authentic. Until I could touch them, there is no way I could know that they didn't weigh half a ton and were not made of metal. I grabbed the handle on the Port Jefferson cover, expecting to feel a firm metal handle (Surprise! It was actually made of rubber tubing).

B.A.M. They are not reproductions but artistic renderings. That's why I'll never understand the art critic's statement. It actually annoyed me. She asked "Why construct an imitation when the original is better?" Can you take a section of a New York City Street home and put it up on your wall? You can't do it if it is still there on the street.

L.S.C. I took the comment in a more complimentary way. When the photos, rubbings and prints of the images were so good, why reconstruct the original scene? Now that I have seen your art, I would ask why wouldn't you?

B.A.M. That's the magic of it. The sculptures, I didn't learn to do those. I think the Good Lord must be guiding my hand because when I am finished some of the works look so real, I can't believe I really did them. That's why they are so much fun because it's like creating magic.

L.S.C. Is your favorite manhole cover still the model for Jacob Mark 1987 in New York City on 68th Street?

B.A.M. I'm still fond of it of the Jacob Mark the skylight chimney-cover. But my favorite is usually the one I am creating.

L.S.C. That may be how you keep them so alive. How have you found manhole covers in so many different cities?

B.A.M. It depends. Sometimes I take rubbing paper on my travels. I almost always take a small camera with me. For a competition at the Orlando Museum of Art, Al and I took panoramic photographs of the museum and the covers near by. I cut around the circumference of several manholes covers leaving enough intact to hinge them. Objects of interest were inserted things underneath. The photo edges were sewn together with raffia. It opened up like a book of photographs with little surprises under the manhole covers.

People often send me photographs of manhole covers they noticed while on vacation. If a camera is unavailable, I take notes on the locations of interesting covers. I have one book devoted to photographs of Long Island manhole covers. Port Washington is in here and Port Jefferson too. The cover environments are also documented: like the road composition and street markings.

L.S.C. As we look through the photograph albums tell me what we are seeing here.

B.A.M. That's a water meter pit cover. Near it is a machine and some kind of a warning sign. It's a pretty interesting scene just as it is, isn't it? This photo is of the Bell System. That's is a photo of a grate I made out of wood which is now at The Baltimore Public Works Museum. The wooden grate was out in my pebble garden. At one time it had daffodils growing out of the openings. My landscaper, Brian Mahoney cleared a spot of dirt under it and planted bulbs in the fall. What a marvelous surprise to see the yellow flowers popping up through the cover the following spring.

Tho se photos are of water covers, which are usually small. These gas covers are also small, about eight inches in diameter. These photos were from a woman who was contractor installing manhole

covers. Our kid's soccer coach knew her, worked for her and told her about my manhole art. She sent expert photos with terrific compositions.

My daughter Ann snapped the photo of the Boston water cover. I love the intricacy of this chimney cover in New York City. I named my sculpture of it "Celestial Grate." These are old castings, of Water Supply covers. This series of hand hole covers I discovered in Sag Harbor near the water. Some day I plan to create a relief sculpture of them. Each cover would open to reveal something interesting. This idea and many other plans swim around in my head waiting for fruition, like this Metropolitan Cover I am working on now. It needs to be completed soon for an exhibition in New York City.

L.S.C. That's at the end of this month. Do you ever feel that there's enough time?

B.A.M. No. There's never enough time. Just ask my husband about the extended working hours just before a deadline.

This whole photo album shows special effects of what's on the streets. I can take artistic liberties and put a grate near a variety of special effects. Oh, there are so many neat things on the street. The markings are art works in themselves. There s a picture of homeless person sleeping on the sidewalk in San Francisco. A manhole cover near by would complete the scene.

L.S.C. How did your work move from renderings of street sculpture to a forum for your concern for the environment? I've read that when you would go to do a rubbing it might be covered in garbage.

B.A.M. Right, I'd clean it all away. It was disgusting. I began to document the littered scenes in photos. I did have to brush away the sand and pebbles so I wouldn't tear the paper while doing a rubbing. Like a detective I bagged and tagged everything on the cover the sand, pebbles, litter and any unusual trappings like glass bits, a lost earring, or a penny. If need be it all could be tossed on a finish work for effect.

My poem:" When the People Care" engraved into some of my work urged people to keep their sidewalks clean and beautiful.

I also created a walk around assemblage with 3 sections: Litter, Beach Waste and CLEAN. The first had cigarette butts being tossed from an auto ashtray. The middle section was medical waste on the sand. The last side was clean and beautiful. Simulating medical waste was a fun challenge. I concocted a mixture of port wine and ketchup to look like aged blood. I squirted it on the gauze bandages and filled syringes and tossed them on the Beach Section. "People Can Stop Pollution" was at the Mills Pond Gallery foyer for a 1988 exhibit. A little kid dashed over and touched the "blood stained gauze" and his mother panicked "Help, you're going to get AIDS!" It was just so convincing and so scary to cause such reactions. I began to realize that it was important for to make statements about protecting our environment.

L.S.C. You have been nicknamed Mrs. Clean as the founder of the Committee for Litter Elimination And Neatness. If you had chosen a different theme for your artwork in the late 70's would CLEAN exist today?

B.A.M. A CLEAN Movement was on its way and going to be born anyway. During the late 1960's, Lady Bird Johnson spearheaded environmental awareness with her program of planting wild flowers along our highways. In the early 70's my kids and I wrote to legislators about litter blighting public places. We did clean up walks and talked to our local Highway Department. The Highway employees had already taken an interest in my manhole art. They taught me about road markings, showed me

the stacked covers ready for use and even pried open a manhole cover to show me how the chimney below was constructed. They gave me a vest, cones and lent me flashing lights.

The Highway Department sent a representative to our first CLEAN and became the foremost supporter of our group. Now that I reflect on it, I believe my manhole cover theme caught their attention and made them more dedicated to our cause.

L.S.C. As you said earlier, it's a community effort. You also taught papermaking. Was it concern for the environment or the aesthetic enhancement to the prints, which motivated the creation and use of your own paper?

B.A.M. Handmade paper is softer and thicker, which results in a deeper embossment. I poured the pulp on the screens. I am not what you would call a true dyed in the wool papermaker. Professional papermakers have big, expensive machines. They approach the process scientifically, using the proper chemicals and the correct beating times. I beat cotton linters in the blender and add a bit of calcium to keep it PH neutral. Then I pour the pulp on the screen and let it air dry. The deckled edges of handmade paper are naturally uneven which add to its beauty.

Using recycled coffee filters; I did a series of 4 prints for the "City Views" Exhibit at Stony Brook University's Staller Center. The local Seven-Eleven allowed me to take buckets of used coffee filters. I rinsed them thoroughly, added baking soda to make them ph neutral and ripped them into little pieces. Filters are very strong paper, so that was quite a task. The pieces were beaten in my blender and poured into a vat. A screen was dipped into the vat and lifted with a deposit of pulp for each paper. Then it was tamped and dried between felts. That was time consuming but the paper was a remarkable oatmeal color and texture. Again there was an environmental statement, using recycled coffee filters.

When I make my own paper I choose from a myriad of additions to enhance the paper. For some papers, I embedded pieces from a wasp's nest. A wasp is Nature's papermaker. Bits of a lace from a Brazilian tablecloth were part of a keepsake and that made other papers special. My mother used to save everything. She was such a saver, which influenced me. I have several boxes containing bits of metallic string, plant fibers, paper confetti, cut out words and symbols, etc. that can be added to the paper pulp.

L.S.C. In 1989 you produced Hazardous Waste Site 1, commissioned by the Islip Art Museum. It was an outdoor sculpture depicting chemical waste pouring from a 55-gallon drum endangering a nearby water supply. Please describe your inspiration for the work and how an idea like this goes from conception to fruition. Is it still intact?

B.A.M. The installation is not longer intact. My inspiration came from water pollution photos. I received a small grant to execute the project for the "Outdoor Sculpture Now" exhibit. The Islip Township Park's Department agreed to dump two loads of dirt on my site. The Long Island Lighting Company loaned wooden stakes and gave Al and me the yellow warning tape to stake out the perimeter. This is how I created the centerpiece for the Hazardous Waste Site:

I had cut open a heavy-duty 55-gallon vinyl barrel lengthwise. I used the larger section and frosted the outside with wood filler, tamped sand on it and painted it to look like rusty metal. The inside contained a foam board covered with expanding foam that I sprayed green. After I poked holes in it, the yellow foam color oozed up through the holes appearing as hazardous waste.

At the sculpture site, the ominous barrel was set into the dirt pile. More fake "hazardous waste bits" spilled on the ground and down onto my water cover below. Al and I set simulated medical waste and other objects into the dirt that I had gleaned from our town dumps: like old tires, a 1960's retro clock and a DEAD END sign. The components were separated after the exhibition ended. The barrel went to the Baltimore Museum of Public Works. The bricks that had been around the water cover were returned to my garden. The water supply cover now belongs to SCOPE serving as an environmental icon.

L.S.C. You have been the recipient of several grants. In your opinion how will the drastic reduction in available funding affect the arts and the future of the arts?

B.A.M. The drastic reduction in available funding is very frustrating for artists. There never is enough money for the Arts. Other countries give more monetary support to their artists. Every so often a 'Day Without Art' is proclaimed. We don't realize how visual we are, until we are deprived.

L.S.C. Let's get back to your creations....So from the conception of a project to the end, may be not at all what you originally had in mind?

B.A.M. No, things change as I go along. I have to adapt to the needs of the project. Some of my wood or plastic creations actually get cut with saws. There are all kinds of tools that I have to use that people don't associate with my art. To give this barrel section uneven edges, I actually had to drill holes and use a jigsaw to cut it apart..

L.S.C. Before this work were you the kind of person to say, "Let me put up this cabinet"?

B.A.M. Years ago I didn't use tools. Al always did it. But doing manhole art has pushed me in that direction. The tool bench was my birthday gift last year and I use all the tools on it. I am getting more comfortable with the router, but I ask Al to handle the big saw. I think I should take a woodworking course.

L.S.C. In a 1989 article Doris Meadows names you as 1 of 4 artists displaying re-creations of pieces of street sculpture in United States Museums and galleries. In addition to your talent, your ability to network has also been noted as a key to your success. Who are the other three artists? Are you acquainted and how do you regard their work?

B.A.M. I want to mention four people who promote manhole art: Mimi Melnick wrote the coffee table book entitled "Manhole Art." She is a jazz pianist and a writer. Her late husband did the photographs. We still correspond.

Marion Bernstein did a manhole cover poster for the Environmental Protection Agency called "New York Underfoot." She sent me a copy and signed it 'from one cover girl to another'.

My daughter Ann and I saw Hertha Bauer's' manhole cover photos and etchings at the Arsenal Gallery at Central Park in New York City. After the show I called her and asked if it was OK. She answered with a thick Austrian accent: "Would a manhole artist mind another manhole artist calling, This is great!" Hertha came to see my exhibit in Glen Cove. Whereas I started with manhole covers and then began to see how the ancient art and the circular form was in everything, Hertha Bauer worked with illuminated manuscripts of circular forms and then discovered manhole covers.

Steven Lowy and Pascal Giraudon do giant street rollings. They ink a grate, cover it with a giant piece of paper and roll over it with steamrollers and heavy equipment. They make it a happening and visually document these events. I'd love to see them in action.

L.S.C. You have said of yourself as a young woman, "In fact, I loved Renoir. I thought I'd be doing flowing landscapes and beautiful people." This work is very different. In your work It's A Grate Life (Chapter One) which is currently on display at the Mills Pond House as part of Mirror, Mirror On The Wall...Women in Self Portrait, you use a pastel manhole cover of pink and rose adorned with seashells and an angel emerging. It is very feminine. You compare it to Botticelli's "Birth of Venus". Is this a reflection of those early influences?

B.8.M. It is delicate. I have done several feminine manhole cover works, some pink, green and pastel, but I think I really love the cement and the nitty gritty. If I see a special stone or a little chunk of asphalt, I save it for future reference. I like Botticelli, Renoir, Raphael, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and all the great classical artists. I have great admiration for them. Their dedication and attention to detail have influenced me. But my theme is contemporary and I enjoy it. Ivan Karp, the unofficial mayor of Soho, said when you get really well known you will not need to sign the front of your work. They will know who did it. Because of his statement I sign the back of my sculptures for verification. Now everyone knows my theme.

L.S.C. You are an artist working in mixed media, an environmental activist, a poet, a teacher, a wife and a mother. You are the perfect role model of the modern woman. How do you find the time and energy to be what we all aspire to, all things to all people, Superwoman?

B.A.M. Well, I have a supportive husband. Al takes half the role with the kids. He does a lot to support my art and he helps me with engineering details and hanging exhibitions. We usually eat out, which saves me a good deal of time. We say everyday of our life is a vacation. My kids are supportive. My mother-in-law believes in my art and so do my friends and my daughter-in-law. My friends help a lot and my barter friends keep me going and keep me motivated. Speaking of support and keeping up my spirits....

Bobbi Mastrangelo gleefully explained how her three sisters and two brothers had sent her a giant box of 60 gifts 60 days prior to her 60th birthday in May. Each day she was to open only one. To her great amusement the April Fool's Day's gift was a set of recipe cards! She has recorded each gift in a diary where she writes her thoughts daily. She refers to it as a spiritual guide. Each gift represented the generosity, care, consideration and love the family shares.

For Bobbi Mastrangelo each day is a celebration of an artist's life. Her love of family, friends, her art and the environment is evident in all her endeavors. Her spirit and enthusiasm are contagious. If an artist's craft must be an adventure to become a lifelong pursuit she has found her life's work. If creativity thrives where there is freedom, joy, an endless process of discovery and a sense of play she has created fertile ground. Bobbi Mastrangelo revels in the joy of her work and reveres its valuable message to all who share in the experience.