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Mental Contagion

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Bobbi Mastrangelo • Poinciana, FL

Interviewed by Sam Edsill | www.bobbimastrangelo.com

Bobbi Mastrangelo's art incorporates manhole and water covers in urban settings. She challenges the viewer to observe the inherent artistry of the early castings, to appreciate the technology and maintenance of our public utilities and roads and to promote conservation and protection of our environment.

Internationally known for her unique creations based on the theme of manhole covers, the “Grate Artist” deeply embosses prints on her hand-made paper transforming mundane iron covers into jewel-like mandalas. Her tromp 'l oeil sculpture relief works artistically capture the essence of utility covers in urban settings. Their appearance is so realistic that viewers wonder how she managed to put all that “weight” up on the wall.

Bobbi graduated cum laude with a BS in Elementary Education at SUNY Buffalo NY where she met her husband Alfred. Influenced by printmaking instructors. Papermaking was studied at Manhattan Graphics Center and at The Women's Studio Workshop in Rosendale, NY.





Celebration-Water

Mental Contagion: The notion of manholes as art, conveys all manner of symbolism: lids over our society's refuse, or passageways for public workers. What sort of symbolism do you see at work here?

Bobbi Mastrangelo: At first the lids only represented access to underground utilities: electricity, telephone, gas and water and to sewers of course. Mentors from the Smithtown, NY Highway Department taught me about the various road marking colors, which identified what was under the cover. They even pried off a cover so that I could see the chimney support below the cover. This information was crucial to the building of my "Con Ed Installation," showing the maintenance of an open manhole cover.

When streets and sidewalks are repaved, the older lids are often replaced with modern, standardized covers. Because of our anti-pollution laws, many of our foundries closed. We now import many more covers from India and Brazil. Most of these designs are universal and plain.

As I traversed the streets of Manhattan, I noticed the contrast in designs, shapes and purposes of the covers. Some of the oldest castings boasted intricate, artistic designs created by real craftsmen. After a while I realized that some of my artworks record the amazing patterns of older covers. So in essence, these are historic documentations.

Water covers varying in size, from tiny hand-hole covers to 24" diameter covers, allow access to aqueducts or water supplies. They inspired my works promoting water conservation and purity.

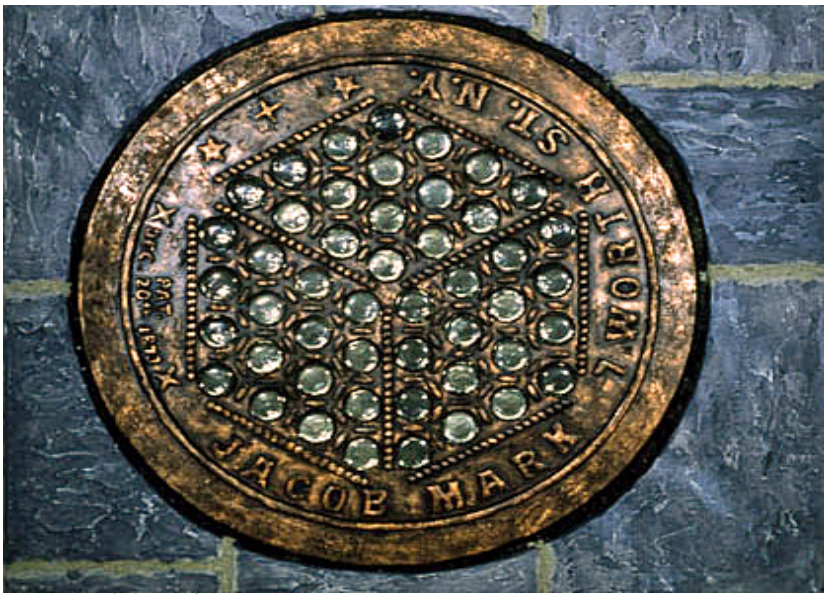


Vestige

MC: You refer to manhole covers as "urban artifacts." What draws you to them as a subject matter? Are you making a statement on the things we overlook in everyday life?

Bobbi Mastrangelo: Actually, I have to thank two professors for my manhole cover theme. Master printer Dan Welden advised me to stick to one style or theme to be a successful artist. Professor Lawrence Alloway looked over my portfolio and pointed out that circles dominated in my work. He authored the book "Pop Art," and it was his teaching that opened my eyes to notice the commonplace items being venerated in the art world.

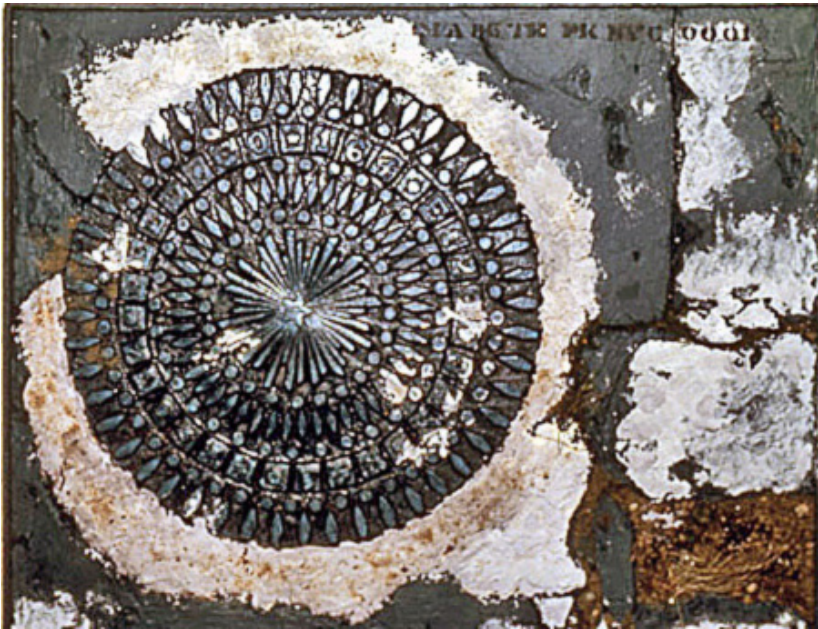
One day, I came across several pages of manhole cover photographs. They were ordinary common objects. We walk over them. We drive over them. Most of them are round. I found the perfect subject matter. Working with this theme has led to the appreciation of other ordinary objects and artifacts.



Jacob Mark Chimney Cover

MC: You must have spent a good deal of time walking around city streets for your projects. Are there places that have particularly interesting grates?

Bobbi Mastrangelo: The streets of Manhattan abound in fascinating covers. In the late 1980's I discovered Victorian age remnants of chimney covers. I don't know if they still exist, but I admired their unusual designs. "Celestial Cover" displays an intricate pattern radiating from a central star. The original probably allowed access to a coal chute below. "Jacob Mark" was a skylight cover. The glass rounds emitted light to the subterranean world. The sculpture relief was based on a Fifth Avenue Site just south of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Celestial Cover

I have drawers of manhole cover rubbings and volumes of related photo notebooks. My supplies for a manhole cover rubbing and a camera accompany me on most trips. "Gaz" (France) and "Irish Blessing" (A Celtic Design) evolved from the photos and rubbings sent by friends.



Irish Blessing



Gaz

Japan hosts a myriad of aesthetic manhole covers, some in color, which reflects the beauty and nature of their

culture. My fantasy is to be sponsored by a Japanese entrepreneur to study and create related art works for an exhibition in Japan.

MC: Could you talk a bit more about your piece, “The Power of Four in 2004,” which shows the path of four hurricanes across Florida? Were you personally affected by these storms?

Bobbi Mastrangelo: As former Long Islanders, we experienced some hefty hurricanes and power outages. We were very new residents of Florida and did not give hurricanes here a second thought. Florida’s Coastal Hurricanes were well known, but we thought Central Florida was a safe bet.

My visual rendition is a small fiber art piece mounted on a bamboo frame I created. The background of hand made paper is black. Black reminds me of power outages. The shape of Florida is in a two-layer relief with tropical green underneath. The top layer is blue fiber paper for The Hurricane Blues. The names: Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne and their paths of destruction are marked across Florida. The round grate set in Tampa Bay symbolizes the flooding waters that needing draining. Pushing the little button in the center of the grate produces the sound of intense hurricane winds reminding us of the “Power of Four in 2004.”

MC: You spent many years as an elementary school teacher and mother before turning to art. How did you decide to pursue art?

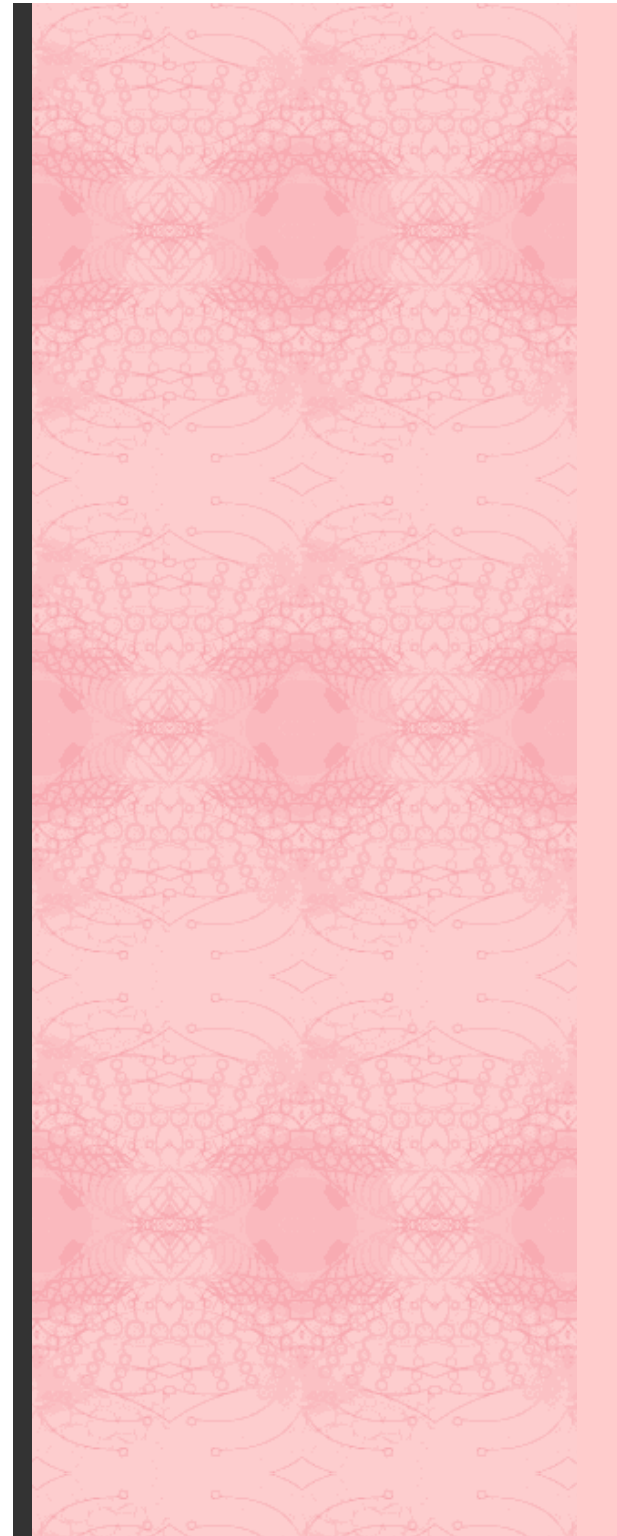
Bobbi Mastrangelo: When I was a young girl, I loved to draw landscapes and houses. By fifth grade my focus was on ladies’ fancy high-heeled shoes. At age twelve I was very impressed by a visit to an artist. Her beautiful paintings hung on the walls of every room in her home.

When we moved to Cheektowaga, NY, I studied art for two years. In my senior year I did a pencil drawing based on a photo of The Amiens Cathedral in France. I think I spent about forty hours on that piece and received an A + on it. However, the Art Teacher commented: “You’ll never be more than a draftsman.” Well that sank to the pit of my stomach. Forget about art, I received The Jenkins Memorial PTA Scholarship for the study of Elementary Education.

During my six years of teaching, I often stayed in the classroom when the art instructor came to teach my class. I learned a good deal and sometimes participated. I took Adult Education Classes in painting and printmaking. When I became a stay-at-home mom, I really needed a creative outlet. My friend and I swapped baby-sitting hours so that I could take an art class at Stony Brook University.

When I had three children at home, I instituted a home writing and drawing program. My daughter Anne Marie said, “Mom, if you’re going to make us write, then you should too!” And I did! When they all were in school, I pursued more college courses in art.

I created my first “Grate Works in 1979. A few years later, I acquired a Dickerson printing press followed by learning to make paper. I alternated between printing on my hand made paper and creating grate sculpture relief works.





Great Wall Jade Medallion

MC: Are there particular artists or people who have inspired you?

Bobbi Mastrangelo: I sure did admire Picasso's energy and ingenuity. The target paintings of Pop Artist, Jasper Johns have been a positive influence on my Grate Works. My mother, Martha Betschen, planned her meals to be colorful as well as appetizing presentations. We played color games at the supper table. Mom taught us to notice details.

My father, Herman Betschen, was a self-taught draftsman for Bell Air Craft for part of his career. He created several inventions and in the 1940's built a huge freezer to preserve our food. For a senior event, he created a robot costume with buttons that lit up when pressed. His inventive and engineering skills impressed me. Some of my larger installations and interactive sculptures are due to his influence and I think about my father when I create them.

My sister, Judie Pufpaff, is a very talented impressionist landscape painter. And the last influence, I must admit was the comment from my high school art teacher, “You’ll never be more than a draftsman!” It nagged at me for years. I vowed to prove him wrong.

Over 25 years after graduation, my art teacher came to see my work. He wrote in my guest book “You have now become my favorite student!” We laughed about the draftsman comment. He confided that his high school art teacher failed him.



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