

A Way with Words

VISUAL ARTIST
JEN PEPPER
MOLDS AND
SHAPES
LANGUAGE

| TEXT BY KATHERINE RUSHWORTH

Words are the presumed medium of writers, dramatists and poets. But don't tell that to Jen Pepper.

Pepper, a Canadian-born and Cazenovia-based visual artist, manipulates words and phrases like dabs of paint on canvas or lumps of clay on a potter's wheel.

"Language is very malleable," she says. "You can actually manipulate it like clay, shape it like a good poet or good writer does."

Her studio at the Delavan Center on Syracuse's West Side is a tidy space, but it's difficult to tell exactly what goes on there. There are no palettes, easels, wheels or jars of brushes. There are a few plaster casts on the floor and a set of steel punches behind a desk. There's also 2 miles of hand-crocheted wire rolled up and nestled on the floor. Words float across sheets of paper ►

Artist Jen Pepper,
of Cazenovia, in her
Delavan Center studio.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE GABEL



Jen Pepper, an associate professor of studio arts and design at Cazenovia College, and director of the Cazenovia College Art Gallery in Reisman Hall, has always been interested in words and language. Her dad was a sports writer who worked for a Canadian newspaper when she was growing up, and she admired his writing. "My dad had a real way with language that made it physical," she says. "I was able to understand that you can kind of move it around like sculpture."

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE GABEL

tacked to one wall, and several hides of dyed and tooled leather are affixed to another wall.

But after you've spent some time talking with Pepper, you learn that everything in her studio is a clue to her past, pieces of a puzzle that might seem unrelated at first glance but are actually tightly interconnected. The manipulation of words, crocheting of wire and tooling of leather are catch phrases in her life's story and are forever woven into the fabric of her creative soul.

Pepper, who is an associate professor of studio arts and design at Cazenovia College and director of the Cazenovia College Art Gallery in Reisman Hall, says she has always been interested in words and language. Her dad was a sports writer working for a Canadian newspaper when she was growing up, and she admired his writing.

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This insight is essential to understanding Pepper's work and process. It's when she began to think about words

as objects, not just symbols. They began to take on dimension. She also realized that painting, her primary medium at the time, could be about more than imagery, more than flat marks on a surface. By the time she was working on her bachelor of fine arts degree in painting at Maryland Institute College of Art in the mid-1980s,

Pepper had begun integrating graffiti — found language — into her canvases, along with found objects.

"Graffiti was text," she explains. "It was a tag. It was an announcement of someone being present in time."

Gradually, she says, the found objects disappeared from the paintings, but the words remained. Today, when you view many of Pepper's works, you read them in the most literal sense of the word.

Debora Ryan, senior curator at the Everson Museum of Art, where Pepper had a one-person show last year, says Pepper is a "collector of texts."

"She re-contextualizes 'found language' by incorporating it into her work, thereby assigning new meaning to the words of others," Ryan says of Pepper.

Ryan's description brings the work of internationally acclaimed artist Jenny Holzer to mind. Holzer's video installation "For Syracuse," currently on view at Syracuse Stage as part of the Urban Video Project, streams more than 200 "truisms," snippets or phrases, across the building's glass façade. The truisms are Holzer's wry and terse take on contemporary culture, politics and values. Pepper acknowledges the comparison to Holzer's work but qualifies it.

"Her (Holzer's) work is extremely political," Pepper observes. "It's a call to action. Mine is like a call to action a little bit, but it's not as political."

Pepper describes her choice of words as "thought bubbles," or "bursts of ideas." Her "sketchbooks" aren't filled with drawings; they're composed of phrases, words that strike her as significant in some way. As she begins a ►



"Broken English," 2008.



"Explosion I," 2008.





In 2010, Jen Pepper was the featured artist in the Everson Museum of Art's first installment of "The Edge of Art: New York State Artist Series." Her exhibit was titled "that which cannot be held."

new piece, she sorts through the pages of snippets, allowing the words to speak to her, emerging in their own voices. The results are open-ended, streams of consciousness that morph into strings of words.

Blustery moment
Fur-lined teacup
Manet and oysters

These are fleeting thoughts that Pepper catches and then bestows with a kind of permanence by committing them to a surface. Some make reference to art history and literature, while others are more personal. She captures them for all to see, read and interpret. Pepper turns their impermanence, their fleeting existence as a passing thought, into something permanent.

This idea of capturing the elusive, "that which cannot be held," the title of her show at the Everson, is another powerful idea running throughout Pepper's work. In the Everson show, she hand-crocheted 2 miles of thick steel wire suggesting the softly undulating flow of water. The graceful ripples of steel spilled from one corner of the gallery's ceiling into the middle of the room, creating a soft filter for a video projection of Chittenango Falls, which played against the back wall.

"The idea of the woven piece was very much like sketching, drawing in thin air, and how line just keeps changing and changing," Pepper reflects. "It's not static and it has the ability to become many things." Water, like language, is not static.

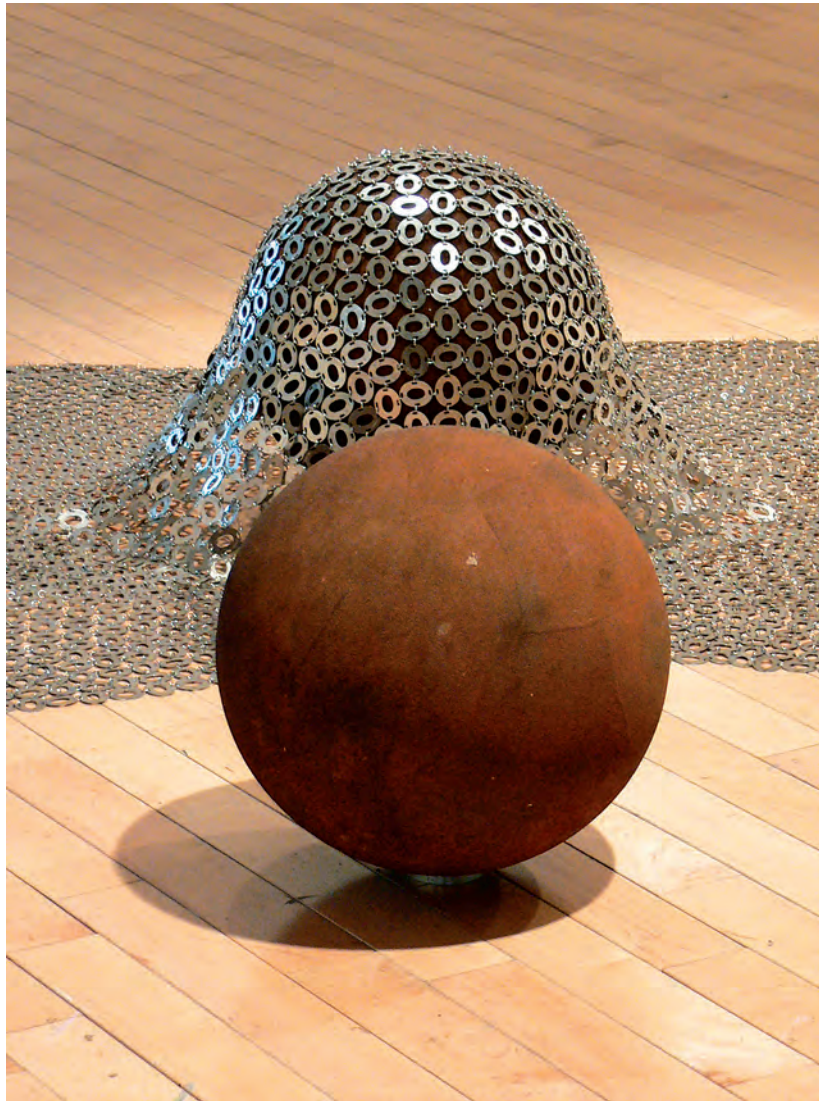
The crocheting of steel wire is a mighty task that some might say is a job for the foolish. But, once again, look to Pepper's past and you'll find a reason why. "My mother had passed just that summer," she says. It was at a time when Pepper was beginning to develop the ideas for her show at the Everson. "She (her mother) was a great knitter, so I was thinking about sweaters and the feel of sweaters."

While knitting was her mother's passion, Pepper said it was too linear a pursuit for her. She found the ►



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"Glistening Pearl,"
2007 and 2008.



"Another Heady Daydream," 2010.



"Onomatopoeic
Pom Poms," 2007.



**"Mind Rush
Bush Wind."**

repetitive action of the needles appealing but wanted a medium that allowed for more improvisation.

"Knitting is so linear, and my mother was like that. I'm just not," she says with a shrug and a laugh. "I crochet now. Crocheting is very much like writing to me. It's like stringing letters together."

Malleability, fluidity and catching the uncatchable are ideas that permeate Pepper's work. Sometimes it's the material or medium she chooses and sometimes it's the subject matter that is the source of her scrutiny.

In a recent set of embossed leather pieces, she explores ways in which the most ephemeral of the ephemeral — steam, breath, the human spirit — can be tangibly captured and represented. In several of these pieces, Pepper painstakingly hand-tools delicate patterns on the stiff leather hides, creating an illusion of her chosen ephemera, in one case steam — a metaphor for her mother's passing. In another dyed hide, a two-headed lamb exhales a bouquet of flowers.

The leather is an unconventional choice of media, but it too has roots

in Pepper's past. Her maternal grandparents bred thoroughbred racehorses in Virginia, and the artist spent many summers of her youth on their farm, smelling the leather of the saddles, hearing the clank of the metal harnesses and feeling the animals' muscles ripple beneath her hands. She observed the ebb and flow of life through the rhythms of the farm. The use of the hides is a kind of homage to those days.

"First, I thought it (leather) was just a material," Pepper says as she runs a hand across one of the hides. "And then I thought, 'No, this is skin. This once was alive.' I couldn't use it like paper. I couldn't put just anything on it."

As respectful as Pepper is of these tanned hides, it's clear she's engaged in a form of branding, or scarification, as she applies her marks to the material. But it is still very much within her conceptual sphere. Think about that scar on your knee or elbow, earned by falling off a bike or out of a tree when you were a kid: a fleeting, albeit caustic moment lost in time, yet marked forever on your skin.

Pepper is quick to acknowledge the myriad influences from her past on her present work. She doesn't intentionally turn to them for inspiration; they simply percolate throughout her creative thought processes, resulting in an ongoing exploration and manipulation of personal history and media.

"I don't know if I didn't grow up around horses and harnesses if I would be involved with hardware and leather," she quickly confirms. "I don't think so; the same with weaving."

We are all products of our past. Some of us deny it, some of us embrace it and others, like Pepper, turn it into creative fodder.

"All of that, those pieces of the past, kind of add up to the sum of the whole," she affirms. "It's the life of an artist." ❖



Five Questions for Jen Pepper

1. If you weren't an artist, what would you be and why?

Having a keen interest in what a culture decides to make and why, I've always been interested in anthropology. I minored in it in school, and it continues to spark my interest and research now. There's no doubt I would go in that direction.

2. What's your favorite book or the one that's had the greatest impact on you? Why?

That's a tough one. There are many. A favorite of mine is David Markson's "Reader's Block." I adore how the author, the obvious bibliophile that he is, constructs the work from shredded and pasted facts from the lives of authors and artists. As a reader we have to work at interpreting and making sense of it. Another that has impacted me greatly is Sadie Plant's "Zeros & Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture." I've just finished Patti Smith's "Just Kids" — a fabulous autobiographical read — poetic, poignant and fresh. I'm a big fan of "Harold and the Purple Crayon," too.

3. What's your most memorable meal and why?

It always depends on context and circumstance. Perhaps eating at a discovered Italian restaurant in Dupont Circle

with a new friend would be one such time. Upon leaving for the bathroom upstairs, I discovered the owners eating privately with their family. They were breaking Ramadan at an enormous table filled with an array of foods, including the largest dates I had ever witnessed. My friend and I were invited to join in their heavenly feast. It was a spontaneous meeting of people where food served as impetus for a genuine human experience that seemed absolutely perfect.

4. Favorite gallery/museum?

Probably the rooftop gardens at the Miro Museum in Barcelona. On a clear day it's a place where space, color, form, sky and sea, pure beauty, come together in unobstructed viewing pleasure.

5. Favorite place in the world to visit and why?

That would have to be Barcelona, where the entire city, the people, architecture, the food, art and design, the tempo, the atmosphere in its entirety — culturally and naturally — speak to the possibility of making and evolving new forms. It's no wonder (architect Antoni) Gaudi settled there and was so prolific. I lived in NYC for 13 years, another of my favorites, is more like home to me.



*The Farm Fields May Be Sleeping,
But the Bounty Still Abounds*

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