

OF BEAUTY AND LITTER

The Manhole Is the Message

By Susan Howard

STAFF WRITER

BOBBI MASTRANGELO of St. James jokingly refers to herself as "Mrs. Clean," but not without good reason. A founder of the Smithtown organization CLEAN, which stands for Committee for Litter Elimination and Neatness. Mastrangelo established herself years ago as a community crusader against littering and other environmental pollution. With this background, it's not surprising she has incorporated her concerns for the environment in her artwork.

That can be seen in "Waterworks," an exhibit of Mastrangelo's realistic renderings of manholes and water-meter covers that is on display this month at Pasta Viola, a Stony Brook restaurant. Mastrangelo is inspired by the circular structures that people walk or drive over every day. In some cases her manhole renderings are accompanied by litter she has collected from Long Island streets and sidewalks, a reminder of the environmental damage committed by the general public on a regular basis.

For instance, "When the People Care" is a print of a water-meter cover imprinted with the words "Wabash, Ind.," clinging to its edge are cigarette butts, empty cigarette packages, beer bottle caps and other types of litter. Underneath is Mastrangelo's printed message: "When the people care enough, they will not litter. Then they will notice the beauty of clean sidewalks and streets. There will be more pride in the environment. When the people care enough. When the people care. . . When?"

In "Save Water," an open manhole is decorated with a collage of various tips on how to conserve water. Many of the smaller renderings are colorful prints of manhole covers. Her larger works and sculptures are uncannily realistic, and that has led to some problems. Once, some lawn-service workers accidentally broke a Mastrangelo manhole cover that she had planted in her yard. The workers sheepishly approached her with the broken manhole — made in part from foam — confessing they thought it was the real thing, not art.

"I've been accused of stealing manholes, because my art looks so real," Mastrangelo said, but she has never had to swipe one for artistic purposes. Instead, she goes manhole



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Bobbi Mastrangelo's piece 'Save Water,' above, combines her concern for the environment with her artwork

Please see MASTRANGELO on the next page

Manholes Messages

MASTRANGELO from Page 75

hunting, looking for ones whose designs appeal to her, and photographs them or does hand rubbings of them. On these excursions, Mastrangelo has amassed a collection of what she calls "color-coordinated litter."

"I have piles of it," she said. "I find it everywhere, and I usually have to sweep it off of manholes [to do a rubbing]. I would say to myself, 'This is disgusting. Why is there so much litter here?' A friend suggested that I do something about it, so I started to add the litter to some of the art."

And that was years ago, before medical waste washed up on Long Island shores and a garbage barge from Islip floated around the Western Hemisphere. A former elementary school teacher whose husband, Alfred, is the principal of Smithtown West High School, Mastrangelo has long been recognized in a local circles as an artist with an environmental mission, especially given her connection with CLEAN, a cleanup and beautification group.

"When I first started to do this no one paid much attention to my theme," Mastrangelo said. "Now my work is considered more important, because everyone is paying more attention to the environment now, and everyone is more conditioned to hear messages about what we must do to protect it."

Mastrangelo believes litterers will recognize themselves when they view the work she couples with discarded cigarette butts, beer-bottle caps and gum wrappers "I would like to think it has some impact," she said. "Maybe after seeing it ['When People Care'] people will think twice before they let litter drop from their hands."

Though the addition of litter to her art is relatively new, Mastrangelo has long had a fascination with manhole covers, many of which were made in the Victorian era with both form and function in mind.

Daniel Welden, a Sag Harbor printmaker, said he remembers Mastrangelo's fascination with grates and manhole covers when she was one of his art students at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. "The graphic quality of her work has a personal appeal, whereas the message has a universal appeal," Welden said. "Her work makes people aware that there is something to consider here. But I would say it falls under the category of Pop Art. She has taken something that is commonplace and has made something of it."

Because of her work, Mastrangelo considers herself a manhole expert. She has collected rubbings of manhole covers from Eureka, Calif., to Hicksville, L.I., but her favorite is located on 68th Street between Park and Madison Avenues in Manhattan. That's where she found a manhole cover imprinted with the words "Jacob Mark." (Often the words refer to the foundry that made the covers). She used the pentagon-shaped design of the cover to create what she refers to as her "skylight grate," filling the miniature circles of the Jacob Mark design with new, clear glass. In another version of the same cover, she used glass dulled by friction and wear, creating a more common look.

"Not all manhole art is beautiful," Mastrangelo said. "I doubt if anyone has looked at manhole covers the way I envisioned [them]." But this is what fascinates her, she said. "I'm fascinated by everything from the way tar falls on it from the streets to the moss that comes up around it."

"Every manhole cover is different for that reason," she added. "They are common things that we take for granted, but perhaps I have shown people that manhole covers just aren't works of iron designed to give underground access to utility workers." / H