

# Minnesota Women's Press

## Sustainable sisters

**GreenGrrlFeature: For eco-conscious artists, green is more than a color on their palette: These women use their artistic voices to express their commitment to the Earth**

by Victoria Nightingale and Stephanie Wilkes



There's no one definition of "green" art, but that doesn't mean there's no such thing. Artists who care about the Earth incorporate recycled materials rather than new ones, make found objects the centerpieces of sculptures or, when they must buy new, focus on sustainably produced products.

Colleen Sheehy, director of education at the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, agreed that "green" is a subjective term. She said that while reusing objects in art may not fit a traditional definition of green, "You're identifying more of the artist's intention ... because they're intending ... to reuse materials and not waste resources."

"Artists live so squarely in a material world," said Karen Wirth, chair of Fine Arts at Minneapolis College of Art and Design. "An awareness of what they're producing [and how they're producing it] is important not only for their work, but for the larger consciousness."



Wirth has a unique opportunity to observe how newer artists tackle the green issue and she sees hope in the up-and-coming. "We may think of women as being the stewards of the earth, but I am encouraged by the younger generation of both genders. They are aware of what they're inheriting and working to make their future better."

Sheehy pointed out that artists have the ability to make the everyday beautiful. "One of the things I love about artists is they're so inventive and they come up with atypical patterns to tackle our problems. [They have] aesthetic and pleasing ways to deal with our environmental issues," Sheehy said.



The Minnesota Women's Press talked with four Minnesota women who are addressing eco-issues through an artist's lens. Whether their art is worn or hung on a wall, each woman's message has "green" written all over it.

### All doors lead to green

From her initial paintings on reclaimed wood doors, Heidi Henderson has been able to create whole new worlds of artistic interpretation, reprinting "snippets" of her original paintings onto scarves, journals, upholstery and more—all while being as green as she can be.

Henderson uses materials like hemp and fabrics made from recycled soda bottles, mulberry paper and vintage buttons. She believes that by using these materials, she is doing her part to help sustain the botanical world that inspires her. "My imagery [and] medium [go] hand in hand—one could not be without the other."



After graduating from the College of St. Benedict in 1993 with a degree in studio art, Henderson began playing around with acrylics and pastel, exploring layering as well as different mediums. In 2000, Henderson realized she found the paper she was painting on "lacking in character," and decided to visit the ReUse Center in search of a different sort of canvas. "I found that first door and I thought 'Oh my gosh, this is perfect!' It just felt so right, and then everything fell into place," Henderson said.

Henderson plans to keep expanding her artistic repertoire, but one thread remains the same: a commitment to addressing the impact we have on the environment. "It all starts with the choices you make. I decided if I can try to keep it local and without harming the environment, then that's what I am going to do," she said.

### **Fervor for function**

Five years ago, through educational and personal inspiration, Eli Condon joined her creativity and fervor for environmental activism to construct functional, green art. She turns items such as refurbished tables into masterpieces with recycled cloth or string and creates natural lamps out of gelatin, leaves and other organic materials. Her creations are not only aesthetic and useful, but carry a message for earth awareness. "My inspiration comes from the respect I have for the planet and other people... from the songs of the red-winged blackbird, the crash of the ocean waves and the excitement of climbing trees. I want to create art that fosters a sustainable world, so that everyone can enjoy the earth the way I have."

You might say that reusing items is in Condon's blood. "I grew up using found objects [and] my mom and I would go to garage sales," she said. As she matured, this passion for art and earth pollinated her education, activism and daily life. Condon's education in environmental studies and art from the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University has "helped me to create a background for the pieces I create. I have the concept behind the art-the facts and the reasoning."

Whether she forges an end table or pieces together a like-new garment, Condon's life and art sum up into one principle: "Keeping things in a cycle of usage," she said, "is better than continuously creating anew."

### **Women's (wood)work**

Alis Olsen, a sculptor who works with natural materials, brings environmental issues out of the woodwork-literally; wood is her main artistic medium. It's important to Olsen to illustrate "our relationship with the environment and [encourage] people to think about better ways to treat our natural resources."

Olsen, originally a teacher, said she had "always been really interested in art, but was sort of intimidated by it." After taking photography classes at the University of Minnesota, Olsen applied to the University's Master of Fine Arts program, where she earned her MFA in photography in 1983. She enjoyed doing both personal and landscape photography, but still felt like there was something missing in her landscapes. "I always wanted there to be more out there than there was-I wanted some sort of magic to be found," Olsen said.

She found her magical inspiration about 15 years ago when she bought a piece of land near Grantsburg, Wis., and began adding objects to the existing landscape. Olsen enjoyed working hands-on with natural materials so much that she slowly switched her focus from photography to her sculptures, mostly using wood as a medium. Her pieces have been exhibited locally and nationally, including in Woodwork, an environmental arts project Olsen founded in 1991.

With works ranging from tall to small, each Olsen piece celebrates the beauty of nature as art while making a statement about the Earth, our actions and ourselves.

### **Green piece**

Christy Ann Hohman of Hackensack, Minn., is an innovative, green tailor with a multi-cultural approach. Using a Ph.D. in anthropology to inform her work, Hohman pieces together recycled fabric to make jackets, purses and even wall art. "I get a lot of inspiration from other cultures," she added. "Having studied so many, I really appreciate their beautiful artistry." Winding down from a prosperous career as an anthropologist and college professor, Hohman now focuses on her business, Christy Ann Fiber Arts.

Hohman grew up sewing. "I've always sewn," she said, and credited her grandmother, aunt and mother. The eco-

consciousness also fell into her lap generationally. "I'm an older person and I did come out of the hippie era," she laughed. With this influence, she has always created recycled crafts and innovative art.

Every piece of clothing, collaged, sewn or otherwise woven together, is as unique as her cultural inspirations. "I frequently try to put little surprises in the jackets-to make people smile," Hohman said. Her art sends a message of human connection, reminiscent of traditional handmade customs of many cultures. "I hope people get a warm feeling from it-not just because it's clothing ... I do think of the sort of person that will potentially wear it. I hope [to convey] a connected feeling because I made it personally, [something] that you really don't get from a machine."

### **Do It Yourself**

Making your creative spark turn green is easy with the right support and resources. You can create eco-friendly by incorporating sustainable practices as you see fit. Swear by oil paints? Look for recycled canvas materials and brushes. Lukewarm about hemp? Integrate vintage textiles into your creations. You're limited only by your imagination.

Art galleries and school district community education classes are also good resources for budding artists. Here are a few resources to inspire you to paint the town green:

### **Dakota County Park's Recycled Art Series**

Hands-on creative classes with themes such as jewelry and paper making. They fill up fast, so register early. \$8-\$16/class.

[www.co.dakota.mn.us](http://www.co.dakota.mn.us), under "County Parks" select "Calendar of events"

651-554-6530

### **ArtStart ArtScraps**

Visit this organization specializing in "reusing and reimagining our world." Classes, workshops, community events for adults, teens & children.

1459 St. Clair Ave., St. Paul

[www.artstart.org](http://www.artstart.org)

651-698-2787

### **The Reuse Center**

Want to paint a door or make a sculpture out of a chandelier? Pick up all your reclaimed materials here and support a green nonprofit, too.

[www.thereusecenter.com](http://www.thereusecenter.com)

Minneapolis: 2801 21st Av S (Enter 29th St.), 612-724-2608

Osseo: 8769 Jefferson Hwy N., 763-315-0949

Maplewood: 1723 E. Hwy. 36, 651-379-1280

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