



Of Pearls and Pollyanna Days

Crafted with bottle caps and barn wood, John Petrey's sculpted dresses are reminiscent of a bygone era

BY STACY BARTON

Over mussels and white wine, with classic rock playing in the background at a restaurant called The Ravenous Pig, John Petrey speaks about his art, the golden years of television and the cultural icons of the 1960s. The artist's current series is a collection of nostalgic dresses made from unconventional materials: bodices cut from handmade paper or patina-coated copper, and skirts constructed

of old barn wood, asphalt shingles or busted yardsticks. Some hang in relief, as though dancing across the wall, while others stand upright, perched like a dressmaker's form.

Recently relocated from Orlando, Fla., to Chattanooga, Tenn., with his wife and fellow artist, Peggy Homrich, Petrey made the trip back to the Sunshine State for this year's Winter Park Sidewalk Art

John Petrey's "Joan of Arc," above, was the winner of a 2007 NICHE Award. "Baby Goes to Vegas" has a bottle-cap bodice and a playing-card skirt.

Festival. While sitting on a director's chair outside his booth, he smiles and watches the passers-by touch the unexpected materials that make up his dresses. One woman reaches out to caress a sleeve, another fingers a splintered skirt, and a third presses her palm against a bodice of bottle



Harkening back a time long gone, "Doris Day," top, is another NICHE Award winner. "Ballet Dress," above, is made of green patina copper and vintage barn wood. "Dressed to the Nines #2" has a yardstick skirt.



caps. The pull of a dozen dresses is amazing; it is as though each viewer has found her own narrative in his work.

After the festival, Petrey talks about the story behind these dresses. It seems the idea began brewing several years ago when he found himself considering those "care-free days of childhood when the world was great." His artistic experimentations took him through a number of Americana pieces until

he realized people were connecting to his dresses. "In the '60s, when I was growing up in southern California," he says, "all the families on TV could solve their problems in 30 minutes." Petrey laughs and continues, "The women's clothes were perfectly pressed, and they wore pearls to cook breakfast!"

Certainly he pokes fun at the absurdity of frying an egg while decked out in pearls. But his critical examination of those Pollyanna days is not a dress burning, but rather a warm preservation of those iconic ideals with which so many of us were raised. Curiously enough, although Petrey memorializes the past, his work doesn't push to tell us what to think about the women in our lives; instead, he seems to give us room to discover what we think of them—what we imagine them to be.

The universal appeal of the view of mother/sister/wife that Petrey portrays is clear, as his work has become more recognizable in the art world. Two of his pieces, "Doris Day" and "Joan of Arc," garnered





prestigious 2007 NICHE Awards, presented annually by NICHE magazine, AMERICANSTYLE's sister publication. His work is currently available at the Lois Lambert Gallery in Santa Monica, Calif., and the Cohen Rese Gallery in San Francisco.

Although his current series of dresses has received critical acclaim, Petrey didn't set out with the intent to make sculpture; he was actually trained at the Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, Calif., and spent his first career as a commercial photographer. When asked what's next for him, Petrey's eyes smile through his rectangular glasses. "I was hoping you'd ask," he says. As he launches into a description of his new work, a theme emerges. The same sense of social introspection found in Petrey's iconic dresses makes itself apparent as he considers "urban clumping" in his new series of public art.

"As a population, we occupy these small footprints of land and fill them with these massive structures," he says. "We cluster like sheep for safety." Petrey reaches up

to demonstrate the focal point of his new work: huge, iron structures that will tower 20 feet in the air. Then he sweeps his arms to show how these intimidating structures will lean imposingly over the viewer, and how he will cluster sheep at the base to complete his satire of "urban clumping."

No matter what series of sculptures he is working on, Petrey strives to make a difference, and like most artists, he longs to leave a lasting impression. The proud father of two adult children, he says, "Someday I want my kids to take their grandchildren into museums around the world and be able to tell them, 'Your great-grandfather did that!'"

He smiles shyly, suddenly embarrassed over his own hopeful presumption. But one can see that he is perfectly serious, incredibly driven and completely passionate about his work. He leans forward and says honestly, "I want to create work that will speak to people for generations to come." ●

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John Petrey's Chattanooga, Tenn., studio looks like any little girl's dream for a game of dress up. "Party Dress," below, is made entirely of bronzed copper patina.

