The Farmington Observer

Creative Living

Marie McGee editor/591-2300

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New York, New York

Michigan well represented at art's epicenter

By Manon Meligaard
special writer

One of Frank Sinatra's hits carries the challenge, "If I can make it there, I'd make it anywhere. It's up to you, New York, New York."

Using the refrain as a kind of paradigm, and considering that New York is the center of the art world at the present time, it's hardly surprising that a sizeable number of metropolitan area artists have succumbed to the lure of the fast-lane megalopolis.

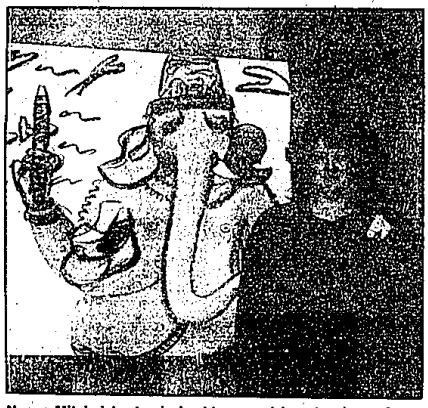
Despite the enormity of the venture, with its attendant risks of fierce competition, rejection, financial uncertainty and loneliness, the magnetism of making it to the top of one's chosen profession exerts an irresistible pull.

Who, then, are the intrepid artists from this area in search of the ultimate American Dream? How drastically have their lifestyles changed and what are their impressions about living and working in the Big Apple. Have they found happiness? Have they made it, or are they making it?

In their lofts or studios in New York, seven of these Detroit transplants talked about their experiences — the welcome breaks and the hard times. All seven are well known in the metropolitan area and are affiliated with established galleries here.

Four achieved almost instant recognition as seminal members of Detroit's avant garde Cass Corridor group and were featured in the legendary Kick Out the Jams exhibition and catalogue (covering the years 1963-1977).

Although all of these maintain contact with Detroit via exhibitions and/of family and friends, few, if any, contemplate returning to Michigan on a permanent basis and most of them now consider themselves denizens of New York.



Nancy Mitchnick stands beside one of her drawings of the Indian god, Ganesa, in her New York City studio.

Nancy Mitchnick

By Manon Meligaard
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Former Cass Corridor artist Nancy Mitchnick, who was born in Detroit in 1947 and moved to New York City in 1974, lives and works in everyman's conception of the artist's archetypal studio — a 150-year-old building in the colorful meat-packing district of lower Manhattan.

Her book-lined loft includes skylights, ceiling cornices, a ladder leading to the sleeping area and two black cats, one of them as big and as playful as a baby panther.

On one mantlepiece were the slightly rotted fruits she used in both their first blush and at maturation for paintings in her show last month at Susanne Hilberry Gallery of Birmingham. The gallery represents her work locally.

Mitchnick, who paints landscapes in all weather in upstate New York remarked, "Perhaps I should complete the cycle and paint them (the fruits) in their last stages of decomposition."

On her studio walls was a series of chalk drawings of the Indian god Ganesa, the son of Shiva, with his intelligent, worldly wise elephant head and big belly.

"I'VE JUST been reading about him," she said. "He fascinates me, and I'm now at the stage where I draw anything that comes to mind."

This kind of laxity is a change of direction for Mitchnick, whose considerable reputation rests upon magnetic, expressionist portraits and lush still lifes in which her highly personal technique consists of layering her canvas in a Gestalt approach of great globs of paint, scraping portions away, considering at length and then relayering.

Like an early Fauves, she paints with an instinctive feeling for life and a love for her images. With her penchant for exuberant colors and a painterly dedication to make her paintings somehow self-inhabited, she is an admitted present-day Romantic artist, "But," she hastened to add, "a Romantic with an edge."

Over lunch at a delightful fin de siecle, sawdust-strewn restaurant beneath her loft, she recalled the Wayne State University-Cass Corridor-Willis Gallery days. At Wayne she studied under Robert Wilbert, for whom she has great respect, but her feelings about the Corridor movement are mixed.

"There was a lot of energy and excitement, and a great deal of competition. It wasn't that easy being a woman artist. There were friends, and there were also enemies."

AT 25 Mitchnick found herself famous (in Detroit) but realized that the time had come to move on and that New York was the logical location.

"Those first years were really tough. I was a single parent with a 9-year-old daughter, and nobody was interested in figurative painting in New York in those days. We often existed on a diet of rice and beans."

Mitchnick survived by taking jobs such as bar tending and cab driving. Eventually she found a teaching post at Bard College. She experienced not only poverty but feelings of total anonymity.

"All my friends were abstract painters or sculptors, and I often felt like changing course and making abstractions myself."

After 10 years of "sticking it out," she found a gallery that liked her work. As luck would have it, it was the prestigious Hirschl and Adler Modern. Paradoxically, this breakthrough came about through literature rather than paintings when she met art writer Sanford Schwartz at a party and found herself deep to a discussion of Henry James.

MITCHNICK, A voracious reader, promised to give Schwartz a copy of "The Tragic Muse." When he dropped by her loft to pick it up, he was enchanted by her paintings and arranged for an appointment at the gallery. At age 35, she had her first one-woman show in New York, and it was a success.

Today, Nancy Mitchnick is an attractive, gutsy, talented woman with a shock of chestnut hair and an infectious sense of humor. Her daughter, Marla, with whom she is very close, is now 22 and attends college. Mitchnick maintains a lasting friendship with Corridor artists Ellen Phelan and John Egner, both of whom also live in New York City, and she visits Detroit often. She has freedom in her life and security in her work. She made it through.

John Egner

By Manon Meligaard
special writer

Undoubtedly one of the most popular professors at Wayne State University, John Egner has seen legions of students pass through his art courses during the past 20 years.

He is also a prominent artist in his own right, and was an influential participant of the Cass Corridor artist group. Presently on sanbatical, he has maintained a studio in New York for eight years, and an apartment with his wife, Linda, for three. Egner, who has an master of fine

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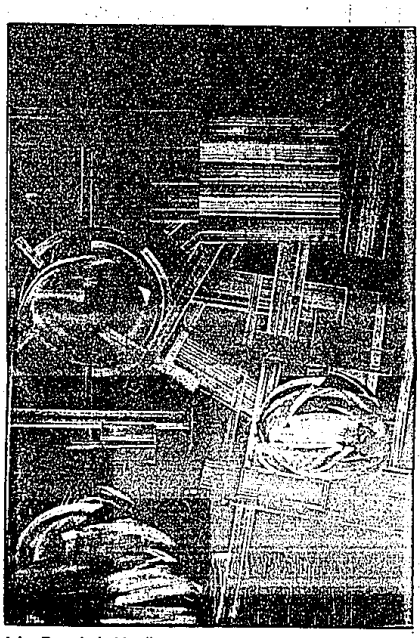


John Egner's bold, oil on canvas, "Blackground," was done last year. It is 102 by 68 inches.

Eskimo ivories make compelling exhibit

By Ira Lax

Glorious was life
In winter
But did winter bring me joy?
No! Ever was I so anxious
For sole-skins and skins for kamiks.
Would there be enough for us all?
Yes, I was ever anxious.
from: "Dead Man's Song
Dreamed by One Who is Alive"

This fragment from traditional Eskimo verse speaks clearly of both the reverence and fear Eskimos have for the natural world that at any time presents the possibilities for life or death.

Their world is one of extremes: from the bitter cold, biting coastal winds and almost total darkness of winter, to the less chilling (summer temperatures are just above freezing), still windy and near perpetual light of the short Arctic summer.

It is in the summer that the Eskimo does as much hunting and trapping as he can to build reserves for the long winter when cold and ice inhibit travel and the large sea mammals have disappeared. Throughout most of the Arctic the Eskimo had to be semi-nomadic because the caribou and seals were.

HOWEVER, THERE ARE PLACES in the Arctic where a stable food supply and less-extreme weather conditions have allowed Eskimos to form permanent settlements.

"By far the richest" of these, wrote Allen Wardwell, organizer and curator of the exhibition of ancient Eskimo ivories now at the Detroit Institute of Arts, is along the Bering Strait, which separates the Siberian and Alaskan mainlands and the Bering and Chukchi seas.

Through this narrow stretch of sea move walrus, whale, seal, sea lion, offshore birds as well as land animals such as ermine, weasel, polar bear and fox.

During the late 19th century and most of the 20th, archeologists and amateurs have excavated artifacts from the permanently frozen Arctic soil that have helped us begin to understand early North American settlers.

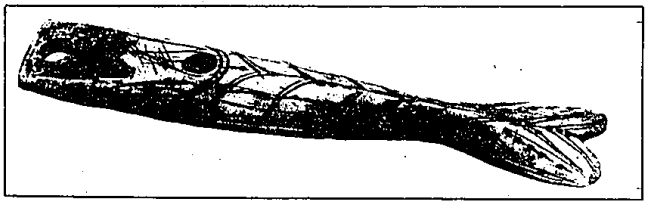
"Ancient Eskimo Ivories of the Bering Strait" is so important, said Michael Kan, DIA curator of African, Oceanic and New World Cultures, "because it gives people something entirely new."

Kan and associate curator David Penney have done much lately to broaden our appreciation of Native American cultures, as was visible through "Ancient Art of the American Woodland Indians" in the fall of 1985.

ONCE AGAIN, the DIA's textile galleries are filled with objects that transport the viewer 900-2,000 years back in time. Without knowing anything about Eskimo culture, a commanding respect is established for the high artistic achievement of these craftsmen.

The material in the show is almost entirely walrus ivory. These sea mammals weighed from two to three tons and were used for food, oil, clothing cord and roofing. Male and female walrus grew canine tusks up to 40 inches long, which they used to dig up shellfish, to defend themselves, and to climb onto land and ice floes.

Although the ivories were an off-white color when first carved, centuries of burial in permafrost have transformed them into warmly hued earth tones of yellow, brown and black.



Handle in the form of a whale, Punuk, is of walrus ivory and just over six inches long. It is on loan from the University of Alaska Museum.

Most of these small pieces were used in hunting, curing and everyday life. There are harpoon parts, cases for sewing needles, knives, gut scrapers, snow goggles, human and animal figures and ornaments of unknown use.

THE HUMAN, ANIMAL AND MONSTER depictions on the ivories were incised with points of flint, small animal teeth (ground squirrel, for example) and iron imported from Siberia.

Although there was a relatively abundant food supply in the Bering Strait area, it never supported a large population. Only about a thousand people lived on St. Lawrence Island (100 by 25 miles) where most of the artifacts in the exhibit are from.

Life was centered around hunting and related ceremonial concerns. Key to understanding this was the belief that if animals were to give up

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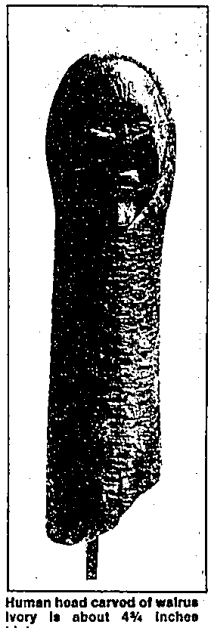
Knife with handle in the form of a polar bear, Old Bering Sea I — Okvik, is of walrus ivory, wood and stone, a little over six inches long.



Human head carved of walrus ivory is about 4¾ inches high.