

STREET SCENE

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Neon art: A sign of the times



does have some artistic pokers on the fire. She created neon pieces that sit behind glass blocks as an accent over a bar in West Bloomfield and supplied a neon backdrop that followed the etched pattern on frosted glass for another company.

HER WORK also includes three-dimensional pieces, in which the pattern can be seen from all angles. Three-dimensional pieces are "very expensive and kind of nightmarish to do," but look very nice when done, she said. "People think neon and they think of a hot pink hotel sign. I'm trying to take it to a different plane."

"There are so many applications that people don't realize that it's neon half the time." Neon art isn't cheap. Her neon cactus, anchored in stone-filled pot and decorated with rubber cement spines, costs \$180. The neon heart is \$150. Neon-accented posters can cost \$350-400, since special framing is required.

And posters need not be limited to somber poses of James Dean or Elvis. It can be used to to accent poster-size portraits and the like.

Neon pieces do have staying power. A well-cared for neon piece should last in excess of 10 years, and some neon pieces have lasted as long as 45 years, Ostoin said.

But there is a question about the staying-power of the interest in neon, especially with the influx of mass-produced neon posters from California. Ostoin frets that the lack of quality in those pieces could well spell the end of the new neon art craze.

But she doesn't worry too much. "Neon is used in so many applications that if the custom work fades out, I'll still be able to use my trade one way or another," she said.

For more information about Alternative Visions Neon, call Denise Ostoin at 534-3405. Her shop is at 27011 Seven Mile Road, Redford.

By Sue Mason
Staff writer

HISSSSSSSS. IT CAN BE a grate-on-your-nerves sound, if you're not used to it. But for Denise Ostoin, it's the sound of art . . . her art . . . in the making.

"The thing I enjoy is that, granted it takes artistic skill to a point, but it's not monotonous," said Denise Ostoin, a glass-blowing tube clinched between her teeth. "It's something different all the time."

The 25-year-old Farmington resident's world is neon bright and rightly so. It's her job. Ostoin is, so to speak, Alternative Visions Neon of Redford, a small shop that specializes in neon signs and art.

A neon green cactus in the window, flanked by a simplistic neon red heart, tells you you're at the right place. It's a no-frills operation. In fact, the frilliest thing in the shop is her pet poodle, which sports hot pink toenails and a matching hair bow.

She opened the shop on a shoestring. "There was \$75 in the bank account." — three years ago, and while people aren't beating down her door for her work, she is, she said "doing OK." Hers is one of a few shops in the metro area that deals strictly in neon.

Ostoin was working in an office — "I moved paper around." — when she decided to stuff it all and enroll in a school in Windsor that specializes in making neon pieces.

LACKING THE tuition up front, she was able to wrangle a payment schedule out of the instructor and spent eight hours a day for next two months learning to work with the glass tubes and gas.

"I figured the worse that could happen was that I'd come out with a trade and make the same amount of money I was making, working in an office," she said. "It turned out that I enjoyed it."

After school, she spent two years at Unique Neon in Roseville, honing her skills. Once she began feeling competent and was able to "look at something and dread not being able to do it," she struck out on her own, doing freelance work for a sign shop in Troy while getting her Redford shop in order.

"The best analogy I can think of is typing," she said, heating a glass tube in the blue flame that blackens a green glass pencil mark. "They can teach you to speed. Without missing a question, she pulls the tube from the flame and bends it, checking it against a beat-

resistant pattern on a long workbench. The finished piece will look more like a pale purple wiggle mark, but will jazz up a somber black and white poster.

AN OPEN sign lays face down on a table, waiting for a session with the bombardier, a 60,000-volt machine that removes impurities from the tube and creates a vacuum before either argon or neon gas is added. The bombardier also "excites" the gas, creating the recognizable neon effect.

But the process isn't as simple as that. Neon patterns are done backwards, and Ostoin has learned to look at a pattern bend by bend rather than as a whole piece.

Ostoin doesn't see herself as an artistic. As she sees it, she has a bit more ability than the average person. Her training was a basic art class in high school, of which she said she never had the discipline to make up drawings, although she could be forced to. She did take drafting in school and enjoyed it. She has incorporated that into her neon work.

"I guess that makes me more of a mechanical artist."

And she has learned a lot since finishing school. She has learned to manipulate the glass and to be patient, letting the glass cool before going on to the next bend. She also finds it ironic that she does such delicate work.

"I'm the biggest klutz in the world," she said. "I've broken things but I'm amazed I haven't damaged anything with all my tripping and falling."

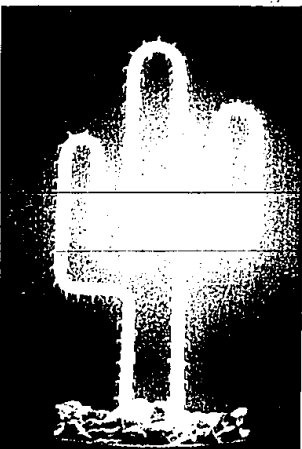
SHE ALSO has learned that if she does something wrong with a piece, it generally can be fixed, although starting over r-rives on time, frustration and wasted glass.

"I have bad days where I walk in and can't do anything," she said. "And on those days where everything you do is breaking it's best to walk away, from it because when you get frustrated you end up wasting glass."

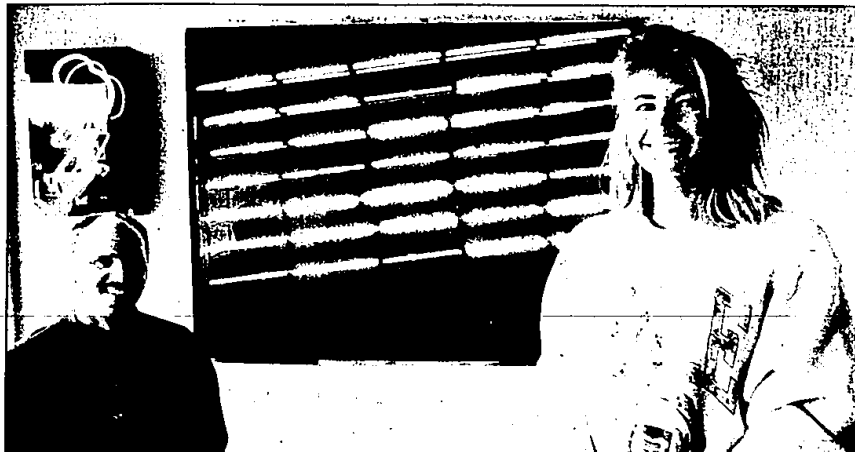
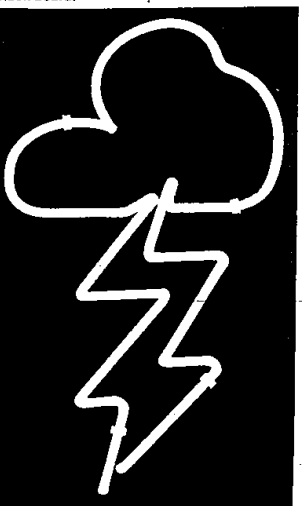
Jon Reeves nods his head in agreement. Reeves worked with Ostoin at Unique Neon and now is her "right-hand man," getting supplies, answering the telephone and doing those things that Ostoin doesn't have time to.

Like Ostoin, he got into neon work because he was looking for something different to do.

Neon patterns are enjoying a resurgence in popularity and Ostoin hopes to capitalize on it. A majority of her business is in signs, although Ostoin



Some of Denise's simple art pieces are a neon green cactus in a rock-lined clay pot and a white cloud with a blue lightning bolt on a black board.



With help from Jon Reeves (left), Denise Ostoin has been able to work on her neon signs and make a living with her shop, Alternative Visions Neon.