

Splendor On The Museum Grass

Provocative Sculpture Of Westport Artist On Display In New Britain

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Niki Ketchman, a Westport sculptor with a soaring imagination and bold sense of humor, is never satisfied with merely sculpting drop-dead beautiful shapes and forms fashioned from industrial materials. Instead, the 58-year-old artist also wraps her stunning pieces in mystery and metaphor. Her multiple meanings ring with the resonance of Sigmund Freud's classic decoder of the unconscious, "The Interpretation of Dreams."

Ketchman, whose pieces go for between \$15,000 to \$25,000 each, is certainly not yet a household name. But with her provocative mix of feminine and feminist themes, her gift for creating visual ambiguities and clever erotic imagery rooted in a wry rather than ribald wit, she's more worthy than some contemporary artists who have been elevated to fame and fortune on the wings of hype and breezy trends.

Nevertheless, one thing for sure is that over the next couple months or so, Ketchman's catchy art just might stir a major buzz in many households. Or at least among members of Connecticut households who venture to see her three most recent sculptures, which the New Britain Museum of American Art has just proudly installed on its front lawn.

These three highly individualistic works were inspired last winter during Ketchman's appointment as a visiting artist at Weir Farm, a National Historic Site in Wilton. Weir Farm was the home of the great American painter J. Alden Weir (1852-1919). Now a shrine to American Impressionism, its landscape inspired many of Weir's greatest works. It was the painter's refuge and idyllic nesting place for his closely knit family. It also served as a clubby, masculine social center for Weir's many celebrated cronies, including such giants and mini-giants of the art world as John Twachtman, Childé Hassam, Albert Pinkham Ryder and John Singer Sargent.

As a tribute to the historical spirit of Weir Farm, Ketchman created the three new sculptures whose themes are rooted in gardens tended by Weir's first wife Anna and

two of his daughters, Dorothy and Cora. Standing 8 feet tall or so and weighing in at about 200 pounds each, the memorial portraits are called "Anna's Failed Garden," "Dorothy's Secret Garden" and "Cora's Sunken Garden."

"Gardens, or the idea of anything growing has always been a metaphor for fertility, specifically for women's fertility. So I'm using the idea of gardens

NIKI KETCHMAN'S three new sculptures are displayed on the lawn of the New Britain Museum of American Art. They include "Dorothy's Secret Garden," right.



LARRY SILVER

that way, while also playing on the idea of feminine beauty as a theme," Ketchman says from her Westport home. The sculptor rides the rails to New York where she works two or three days a week in her roomy, high-ceilinged studio in Brooklyn in a more than century old converted factory building.

Each elegant sculpture on the New Britain museum's lawn is a product of intensive labor, done as a kind of tribute to what has

traditionally been considered "women's work." Controlling virtually every square inch of her sculptures, Ketchman, as noted by critic Marty Carlock, virtually "weaves, braids, sews (and) does macramé" with her needle-nosed pliers while laboring with such materials as aluminum wire, steel cable and stamped metal.

While "the hand of the artist" has virtually disappeared in minimalist art, it's a powerful presence in Ketchman's monumental celebrations of femininity. And it's equally felt in her pieces mocking male fantasies of women as mindless objects consisting of nothing but breasts, buttocks and genitalia. One of her satirical works called "Mounds" is a puckish view of the breasts of Mother Earth. Another typically metaphor-packed work laden with latent sexual context is her marvelously saucy, outrageous sculpture called "Laced." At first sight, "Laced" looks like a giant shoe or boot. But then, dreamlike, it morphs into a tightly laced up corset bursting with steamy dominant themes and

pinched-up hints of bondage.

Initially, "Laced" looks quite innocent. It evokes a reverie of Disneyland, or perhaps of a fairytale, or even as a celebration of the poor old woman who lived in a shoe. Underneath that saccharine surface, though, the piece is laced with fetishism and just about any sort of deeper, darker Freudian interpretation the viewer may want to squeeze into it. It's a show-stopping shoe piece with much body and sole. If only it had a tongue that could speak and unravel the Ketchman riddle wrapped in a mystery inside a Freudian enigma.

Similarly, the three wonderfully weird Weir pieces on the museum's lawn are layered with meanings that make them a delightful three dimensional Rorschach test for viewers to unravel.

Here are a few clues for one of the works, "Anna's Failed Garden." Ketchman plays off the historical fact that Anna Weir in 1886 planted a garden on the farm in which not one flower grew. Later in 1892, tragedy struck the Weir family when the beloved Anna died from childbirth-related complications not long after giving birth to Cora.

Ketchman develops a theme of mortality by shaping her figurative work so that it looks eerily like a mummy. The classic Egyptian mummy was, of course, a beautiful mask for death, a wrapping for mortality. Ketchman's mummy shape is brilliantly decorated with rows of painted steel vegetables — carrots, corn on the cob and mushrooms. But not a single metallic flower blooms, just as none bloomed for the doomed Anna in her barren garden.

At the top, or head of this mummy dearest, steel rods spring forth. At first they look like hair. Yet, in the perpetual ambivalence that flows through all of Ketchman's pieces, the hair morphs into a second meaning as branches bearing fruit.

Apples miraculously sprout from these wiry hair or branch appendages. Some surreal fruit has fallen to the base of the work where it will rot.

Apples and gardens, of course, have been linked together since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden. By playing with symbolism like this, Ketchman creates a surreal ambience in a dream-like world in which an apple or a garden is never just an apple or a garden.

Niki Ketchman's sculptures will be displayed through September on the lawn of the New Britain Museum of American Art, 56 Lexington St., New Britain. Information: 860-229-0257.