

January 18, 1997, Saturday, Final Edition

## Blum's always ahead of art pack; Charming, quirky D.C. resident specializes in painting...foreheads

**BYLINE:** Toni Marshall; THE WASHINGTON TIMES

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To walk into the Market 5 Gallery at Eastern Market in Southeast is to walk into a world that is a bit over the top.

All you see is foreheads. Foreheads of rabbis, foreheads of horses - even the Statue of Liberty sports the top of her crowned dome among this cerebral crowd.

These heads belong to Jonathan Blum, whose "Ten and a Half Years of Forehead Portraits" is on display at the gallery through Feb. 9.

Call him Jonathan, because he's not the type of guy you would associate with a staid honorific. He doesn't want to be seen as just a high-brow painter.

He's the kind of guy who has traveled the world to follow a love interest, and with innocent charm has been able to land one-man exhibitions in such cities as Tel Aviv, Prague and Berlin.

"Jonathan always has a successful opening here," says John Harrod, director of the Market 5 Gallery. A stunning reflection of his forehead and cap is mounted on a wall not far from where he stands.

"He's one of our more popular vendors. He also was one of my students in the youth theater program," Mr. Harrod says.

"Jonathan's paintings make this building come to life," he says, surveying the immense space that resembles an old warehouse. The walls are painted black to camouflage wear and tear.

Although the artist's work may be seen as fun art by the many admirers who have bought his popular portraits of Sesame Street characters such as Ernie and Bert or his rabbis, Jonathan wants to be known for more than his foreheads.

"It started off as a cartoon strip. The early foreheads were fun and playful. They've developed over the years," Jonathan says.

His love of rabbis stems not from a highly religious Jewish upbringing but from a friendship he developed with a rabbi and his family while living in Israel for six months in 1994.

"The rabbis are popular because they walk the fine line of being respectful and serious, and playing a self-parody," he says. Ironically, he sells many close to Christmas.

As the foreheads have developed, so has his artwork - he has come a long way from the starving artist who spent his summers in Provincetown, Mass., where he participated in local art shows.

Jonathan graduated from Emerson College in Boston with a bachelor's degree in fine arts in 1987. He has attended Syracuse University in London (spring 1986); the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (fall 1986 to spring 1987); and the School of Art Institute in Chicago (fall 1987).

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"I'm walking away from calling them foreheads. They are almost full faces now," he says, pointing to one of the rabbi portraits. The portrait was painted in Cadaques, Spain. It's almost the whole face of a rabbi. He admits he's outgrowing this heady world. He realizes his paintings are butting heads, so to speak, with the image he wants to project as an artist.

He's now focusing on the ketubah, a Jewish marriage contract written on parchment. The frame is handmade. Jonathan breaks tradition by adding portraits of his foreheads, or anything else an engaged couple might request.

"I guess I've kind of pigeonholed myself. But over the years, I've come to realize that it's important not to paint them so accurately but to paint a feeling. I'm trying to do that," he says.

"The best portraits are the ones in which you look at the forehead and see it as a portrait. If you say 'Where is the mouth?' then you know you are not getting the message."

At 31, Jonathan has managed to carve his niche as one of the pre-eminent monoprinters in the area. His rubbings attract a long line of buyers on weekends at Eastern Market.

He'll do art on commission, and he's presently painting a portrait of the late Miles Davis in his Capitol Hill carriage house that serves as his residence and art studio.

He has even painted the forehead of D.C. Mayor Marion Barry, although uncommissioned. He believes the mayor and his staff were not too happy with the outcome.

"I think maybe they misunderstood the painting," Jonathan says.

The self-deprecating artist is not in the habit of offending people. He's all manners.

When you enter his cozy carriage house that brims with his personality - a few worn velvet couches, an eclectic selection of music that includes the Joshua Redman Quartet and Beck Mellow Good - the host breaks out the charm.

In Jonathan's home, you celebrate the moment with a huge quart-size cup of coffee and the last bit of cookies left in his cupboard.

Stacks of collages are tucked on shelves, and a lone easel is poised in front of the window, for maximum light, of course. An old curtain with characters from Sesame Street is used to block the watchful eyes of neighbors at night.

The curtain also serves as a reminder of where the artist has been. The face of Bert, which launched his career, looms back at him.

But it's time to leave Bert behind, and his D.C. home. He has the yearning as most artists do - to make it big in New York City. He is fortunate enough to have a sister who lives there. His father lives in Bethesda, where Jonathan grew up. His mother lives in Adams Morgan. Wherever he turns, he says, he'll carry the few scribbled words by his hero. Pablo Picasso:



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Forcing yourself to use restricted means is the sort of restraint that liberates invention. It obliges you to make a kind of progress that you cannot even imagine in advance.

"Although I love it here, I'm ready to move on. I'd like to be seen as more than just one dimensional," Jonathan says.

GRAPHIC: Photos (A&B, color), A) "I'm walking away from calling them foreheads. They are almost full faces now," says Jonathan Blum, one of the area's major monoprinters.; B) A forehead portrait of the late Miles Davis sits on an easel in the artist's Capitol Hill carriage house, which also serves as his art studio.; C) Artist Blum with one of his most recognized works, "The Rabbi", All By Karen Ballard/The Washington Times; Illustration, "Dad," a 1992 collage by Jonathan Blum, is an example of the artist's focus on foreheads. More can be seen on display at Eastern Market.





Money inspired faux finishers Liz and Tom Warnock.



Display artist Stanley Hill used Metro transfers like holly leaves.

C O V E R S T O R Y

# Ho, Ho, Hubcaps

*Wreaths That Tell Washington's Story*



Stylists Aniko Gaal Schott and Stefania Conrad treated their hubcap to ribbon, dried flowers and a ball of thumbtacks.



Antiques dealer Marston Luce's fixer-upper comes with tool kit.



Hand-painted paper in Christmas colors from artist Sheila Crider.

By Jura Koncius

**W**hy does the White House staff hang 187 wreaths all over the windows and doors of the president's home this month? What moves the driver of a great big D.C.

Department of Public Works trash hauler to hook a ring of greens on the front of his truck?

Wreaths, it seems, are among the most universal of holiday symbols. If roundness is their commonality, why not use some unexpected round object as a base for a wreath for our city? We chose the hubcap.

We were intrigued, frankly, by a new book, "Great American Wreaths" by Martha Stewart and Hannah Milman (Clarkson Potter/Publishers; 144 pp.; \$20), which presents the wreath phenomenon in its most elaborate form to date. Pictured are 52 classy but non-traditional wreaths: one for each state, the territories and the nation's capital. Stewart and her staff created wreaths of natural materials they researched to be representative of each place. Rhode Island's is made of quahog shells. The Kentucky wreath is living bluegrass rooted in its own circular mound of earth. Virginia gets dogwood; Maryland black-eyed Susans.

For Washington, Stewart and Milman created a regal confection of gold ribbon, acorns and pressed leaves from native white oaks (*Quercus alba*), the stately trees that grace the White House lawn and Capitol grounds.

The sight of them may well be memorable to visitors such as Stewart. And the gilded wreath certainly captures the majesty of the Federal City. But what of the Washington that residents know? What of the urban fabric? We wondered what symbols Washingtonians would use to represent their proud, if beleaguered, city on the Potomac.

To find out, we asked eight people whose professional personas are defined by creativity to make wreaths for the city. They were instructed

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Washington Opera's Mattison Williams created a miniature Beltway.

*Making the Gilded Version: Page 15*

Photography by Claudio Vazquez for The Washington Post



## Wreaths

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to use whatever decorative elements they wished with wit. We gave them a tight 10-day deadline, but we also gave them a head start: As the wreath base, each was supplied with a previously owned hubcap salvaged from the roof of Petrovitch Auto Repair, Inc., 2303 14th St. NW.

We chose a recycled hubcap not only for its classic round shape but also for its metallic quality suggestive of the true urban experience. It would be a point of reference for commuters as well as an acknowledgment of the chronic potholes the city is known for.

We trusted our team's sense of style would eliminate any risk of turning a holiday wreath into a political statement.

We had seven takers. One turned us down flat, dismissing the concept as "too negative."

The seven wreaths we received came with plenty of charm. The personality of our hometown was portrayed in such symbols as Metro transfers, toy cars on a tiny Beltway and wads of money. Not an acorn or gilded oak leaf appeared, though several designers included golden bows.

Mattison Williams, properties master of the Washington Opera and a resident of Adams Morgan, went to town with his Mercedes hubcap. Inspired by its round shape, he adopted the Beltway for his unifying theme.

Gathering materials from Hechinger, MJDesigns, Toys 'R Us and a cake-decorating shop, Williams put together his interpretation of Washington. He covered the wreath with a circle of miniature plastic architectural columns meant to support wedding cakes, then added tiny green wreaths, doves of peace, AIDS ribbons and silver coins once used as an opera prop. Around the rim, he built up a miniature Beltway lined with toy police cars and fire engines. He lit the whole thing with tiny white Christmas lights.

"I love Washington. It hurts me to see it be such a mess, but there are so many beautiful things in it," says Williams, who has lived here for 15 years.

"It's a little bit of everything," he says of the wreath, "the whole experience of Washington from the traffic to mortality to wise men and columns."

The wise men are represented by three golden figures glued onto the face of the hubcap. The figures were left over from a long-ago production of "Romeo and Juliet," he said. Without

wanting to be sexist, Williams suggests that "Washington needs three wise men to descend from the heavens and fix all of it. That is the Christmas wish in that wreath."

Dupont Circle antiques dealer Marston Luce bought a standard wreath of evergreen boughs and wired it around his hubcap. Then he assembled the decorations: a hammer, saw, bulb planter, screws and the like. He sprayed the tool collection with chrome auto body paint, attached the pieces stylishly to the greens and added the coup de grace. "Fix Me" was the message clearly spelled out in the center.

"Somebody told me this was a Cadillac hubcap," says Luce, who plans to hang the wreath on the door of his Cleveland Park house, which he says is in need of some repairs. "I guess this is the Cadillac of wreaths."

Inspiration came while riding the Metro for Stanley Hill, a Washington area freelance display artist.

"I was thinking about doing something that I see on a daily basis in Washington. Then I was walking through the Metro and saw a bunch of Metro transfers on the ground."

Hill, who creates the displays at downtown's Tiny Jewel Box, says he collected more than 200



paper transfers from all over the system, from Ballston to Eastern Market to Silver Spring. He then cut them to look like holly leaves and glued and stapled them into the shape of a wreath around the hubcap.

Artist Sheila Crider, who has lived in Southeast since she was 8 years old, used paper of a different variety on her wreath. She attached strips of her own hand-painted Christmas paper in red, green and gold to the hubcap.

Crider usually designs a series of 100 percent cotton rag papers for the holiday season. "I wanted this wreath's message to be a happy one," says Crider, who is known for her mixed media works on paper and cloth.

"So I added brass bells. If someone knocks on the door, the little wreath can ring."

Local artists and designers Aniko Gaal Schott and Stefania Conrad went for a more Southern look for their hubcap, which they left more exposed than any of the others. Looping the spokes with gold ribbon, they accented the wreath with dried greens and flowers. In the domed center of the hubcap, they placed a ball that had been carefully layered with thumbtacks by 7-year-old Christina Conrad.

Furniture designer Joe Niermann of Niermann Weeks

thought that metal represented the urbanity of the city. His festive-looking, minimalist wreath weighs 50 pounds and is made of 15 pounds of copper plume shavings, 10 pounds of galvanized sheet metal leftovers and about five pounds of aluminum flashing strips. It is truly a wreath for the millennium.

Metal strips were clumped in groups of six and then wired together and bent out. The curly bow added at the end is copper covered with gold leaf.

Washington interior designer Frank Babb Randolph, who also designs for Niermann Weeks, as well as New York furniture designer Rene Estacio, who happened to be in town working with Niermann on a project, consulted on the wreath's design. So did many other employees at the Millersville, Md., company headquarters where the Niermann Weeks high-end furniture is made. Someone dubbed it the "Road Warrior" wreath.

Look but don't touch. Niermann cut himself badly several times while fluffing out the metal strips. "If you try to make this at home," says Niermann, bloodied but unbowed, "have a paramedic on call."

Then there's always the theme of money. "We thought of all the various things that could be a theme for Washington. One would be the economic plight of the city locally and the realities of the federal government," says artist Tom Warnock, who along with wife Liz owns Warnock Studios, a D.C. firm specializing in surface decoration.

"Money is sort of the raw material of Washington since it's not a heavy manufacturing town. Once that became our focus, we tried to translate that into something Christmasy."

The Warnocks, assisted by artist Jeff Stockberger, wired a standard wreath from a local garden center onto a hubcap. In the center, they affixed a giant blow-up of the eagle that appears on the dollar bill.

On pearlescent white Christmas balls, they did pen and ink sketches of the American presidents who appear on the various denominations of currency. International monetary bows—paper money from around the world—are tacked on with red berries.

Tom Warnock says the money wreath will grace the front door of their home in an undisclosed quadrant of the city. "It will be a litmus test of Washington holiday spirit."





PHOTOS BY TOM ALLEN—THE WASHINGTON POST

Taking recycling in an artistic direction, Tom Noll has employed painted bikes and models of human arms in his Manassas garden.

## Va. Artist Never Promised a Rose Garden

Rather Than Silver Bells or Cockleshells, You'll Remember Bicycles All in a Row

By Ann O'Hanlon  
Washington Post Staff Writer

When you spot the fence made of eight white bicycles strung together on Tom Noll's front lawn, you know something is different in this otherwise conventional suburban neighborhood in Manassas.

And when you look down the driveway at the purple garage doors and see 30 more bikes sitting atop the garage roof and models of human arms—dozens of them—poking out of the garden, well, then you know that you're deep into the realm of the eccentric.

But it takes seeing the 14-foot green ladders sticking straight up from the ground with crystal ornaments hanging from their tops—or the "chicken room" in the back of the house, or the elaborate living room decorated with gold Louis XV throne-like chairs and other furniture spray-painted gold to match—to fully comprehend.

Tom Noll is the Andy Warhol of Manas-



Noll pauses near his medicine wheel, a grouping of stones with purported healing power.



sas.

It didn't happen quickly, the 40-year-old artist explains.

The fantastic backyard garden, which weaves the botanical and the funky, took more than four years to create.

Only a month ago was he finally ready to open it to the public free.

The question is whether the public is ready for him.

Several dozen people have visited so far. Some came after hearing from a garden club member or a friend that this can't be missed, others after seeing the

modest sign Noll put on his mailbox, inviting people in on Monday and Tuesday afternoons to "let your imagination SOAR!"

Some like it, some love it, and there are some who just don't know what to think. So they're polite.

"It's a conversation piece," said Lillian Boes, admission director at the nursing home across the street.

"It is different. There's no getting around that," said next-door neighbor Susan Lawson, 90.

"The flowers are beautiful," said Mary

Hatter, who lives next door on the other side. "I don't go for any of the other stuff."

The other stuff is what you notice first—and second and almost exclusively—as you tour the garden of 450 perennials. The 16 sets of human arms are rubber glove molds that Noll found in a junk store. Other bicycles, white from spokes to seat, dot the garden, one with a large figurine of a Dalmatian riding on the back. There is a large ceramic frog and his house, with the words "P. Charming" over

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## In Manassas Garden, Whimsy Is a Growth Industry

GARDEN, From D1

the door. Signs near him read "10¢ A Kiss" and "Wart Removal, \$100."

There is Noll's meditation area, and there is the Indian medicine wheel (an arrangement of stones reputed to have healing power). And there are the statues he makes of rocks and rebar (the steel rods used to reinforce concrete) and the chain saw sculpture of an American Indian and the "Guest Bedroom," according to a sign in the yard. It is an old wooden bed frame covered with marigolds. An old screen door standing in the dirt announces the entrance to this bedroom, and a window frame filled with mirrors reflecting the garden sits above the bed. The main tree in the garden houses speakers so Noll can

drown out traffic sounds and truly relax in his creation.

"You'll see people just look over with a big smile on their face. To me, that's what it's all about," said Noll, who will start teaching art classes this fall in his garage. The artist earns his living with construction and remodeling work and with sales of his creations every third week at Eastern Market on Capitol Hill in Washington. He recently refurbished an old Middleburg schoolhouse, converting it into a home.

Noll knows he stands out, especially in the staid city of 32,000.

Manassas isn't SoHo, after all, or even Dupont Circle, and the row of modest red-brick houses on Sudley Road where Noll lives suggests—in fact, almost demands—

middle-class normality.

Which is precisely Noll's point.

"We're just so stifled," he said. "I just try to teach people to really use their imagination."

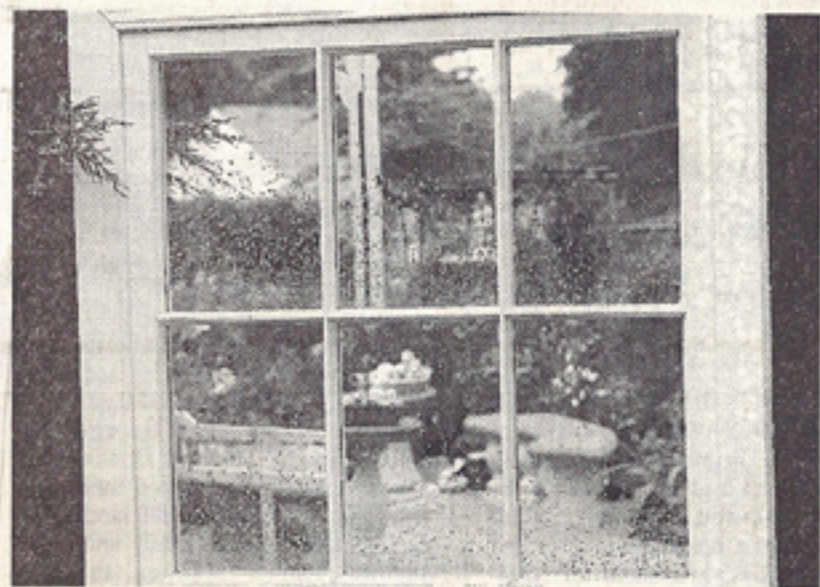
The chicken room does that.

It is a small porch-like room at the back of Noll's traditional brick house, and it is filled with wooden, ceramic and metal poultry—on the backs of the chairs, lining the walls, or in tiny chairs at tiny tables.

There are about 80 of them in this red, black and white room, which sports extensive polka dots down the walls and on the furniture.

The room was created for sick friends, Noll said, as a sort of therapy.

"You can't be miserable in the chicken room," he said.



BY TOM ALLEN—THE WASHINGTON POST

A window filled with mirrors reflects surrounding details of Tom Noll's garden.



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# Fashion

*By Robin D. Givhan*

## The Garment District

Artist **Maryanne Pollock**, right, says her heart guides her when she creates expansive, abstract canvases, but her business sense leads her to hand-paint scarves.

She works out of her apartment in Adams-Morgan. In the workroom, the rectangular windows of the neighboring building inspire the fluid geometric patterns that reappear in several of her sheer chiffon scarves.

Those who have a bias against wearable art—so often garish, clunky or amateurish—will be surprised by many of Pollock's pieces. While they are decidedly handmade—an imperfect line here, a bleeding shape there—many of them are delicate, restrained and elegant. In Washington, Pollock's scarves are sold at Betsy Fisher on Connecticut Avenue.







# Reflections

On Artist And Craftsman Brian Rayner

The man is wild, with a bushy beard and abundant hair. His hands are care worn and stained. At first impression he might seem intimidating. He is also one of the nicest people I've ever met.

That man is Brian Rayner an artist, craftsman, husband, and father. Brian, age 44, lives outside of Quicksburg with his wife Inez and their three children: Curmi, Manuela and Giselle. He is a man that is at ease with himself and the world he lives in.

In a small shop adjacent to their house, Brian works magic with native, Appalachian, Shenandoah Valley hardwoods. There's a smell of turpentine and wood shavings in the cool, dark interior. The gleam of cherry, walnut and apple woods can be seen in various stages of finish and there's a sense of harmony in the room, of man and wood.

The harmony of Brian Rayner started in Dayton, OH, where he was raised. He attended college at Ohio State and then became an officer in the Navy and was stationed out of Norfolk. After the Navy Brian wanted to go to law school but couldn't so he started working with his hands as a carpenter.

and, and father. Brian, 44, lives outside of Quicksburg with his wife Inez and their three children: Curmi, Manuela and Giselle. He is a man that is at ease with himself and the world he lives in.

On a trip to South America he met his future wife, Inez, in La Paz, Bolivia. After returning to the United States they settled in the Valley and Brian worked in construction. Progressive back problems led him to work at Narrow Passage Antiques where he "learned how the furniture was made."

"As I learned more about their construction I was ready to start making my own," Brian said. That learning has paid off. For the past seven years Brian has sold his art and renovations at the Eastern Market on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. "I feel good that I've gotten this far being totally self taught," he said, "I enjoy selling on the street, it's a good balance to go one day a week for that kind of activity; there's a camaraderie between the vendors, a self-employed brotherhood."

When describing his love of working with wood Brian talks of the "colors, feeling, beauty, texture, depth, the organic nature of wood and the fact that you can look at a tree and through my working with it can turn it into a functional, beautiful piece of art."

The Rayner family also plays a large part in Brian's artistic endeavors. "The way we are as a family unit with me as 'the provider,' it all becomes one thing," he said. The children help stain and sand the furniture and also

load the van and help set up the display. Inez, along with running her own business, sells Brian's furniture at The Gypsy Wagon, an arts and crafts co-operative store located on 263 outside of Mount Jackson. "It's all of us working together." "I couldn't ask for anything better."

Though Brian may often work seven days a week it seems more manageable to him than when he used to work for someone else. "I may be dog-tired but I've gotten that way doing the work that feels the best for me."

If you are interested in Brian's work it can be seen at The Gypsy Wagon, located on Rt. 263, West of Mount Jackson and at Architectural Artifacts and The Eastern Market (on Saturdays) in Washington D.C.

