

Crossing Lines

By Suzanne Gerber | PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREGORY CHERIN



NORMA MINKOWITZ'S home studio is filled with finished works and some still in progress. The circular piece above is called "Rusky Certza" (Russian Heart), a reference to the intricately embroidered, Russian peasant blouses worn by her mother.

IN NORMA MINKOWITZ'S WORLD, birds are trapped upside-down in cages, trying to break free but their little beaks are stuck ("Silent Effort"). Human bodies double as landscapes ("I Am the Land"); a heart with a bone piercing its center rests on a dainty doily ("Russian Heart"). Bodies fade to nothingness in works like "Goodbye Goddess" and "Body to Soul." It's not uncommon for heads, shoes, torsos, even children to be stitched into cocoons that simultaneously protect and trap them. But Norma isn't some angry, antiestablishment

artist whose shows are banned in Boston and precipitate ACLU backlashes. She's a delightful Jewish grandmother who's happy with her life, her marriage, her family and her work. So what's a little dark side among friends?

"I think everybody has the same fears and thoughts," says Norma, while sipping a cup of herbal tea in her comfortable Westport living room. While homey, the sprawling house feels more like a gallery. The eye can't move without lighting on a painting, sculpture, vase or abstract



WRAPPED AND CAST balls that are to be inserted into a vessel, creating a floor sculpture for a collector

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objet d’art. Norma continues: “Writers put those ideas into words, and artists put it into their work.” But unlike many artists, whose childhoods are repositories of grim memories and unhappy experiences, the worst thing Norma can recall is getting lost in a park as a young girl and being found by a friendly police officer.

But a darker shadow surrounds that innocent-sounding tale of an errant child in the carefree pre-WWII world. Norma’s mother lost a son before Norma was born; she never got over the loss and she may have unknowingly passed her fears on to her daughter.

The childhood Norma remembers, however, is straight out of a Merchant Ivory film — by way of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Her father, a Russian-born concert

pianist, was seldom home, so Norma and her mother spent late nights sprawled out on the parents’ bed, talking, listening to the radio and always crocheting. Norma remembers it as a “very warm, nurturing, safe experience.”

Her mother crocheted practical things — like clothes for the family — but little Norma loved to experiment. “If I dropped a stitch or made a mistake, my mother would tell me to rip it out and start over,” she recalls. “But instead I’d go in a new direction. I was so excited about crocheting, I couldn’t stop.”

Soon she was intentionally dropping stitches and creating three-D forms, and crocheting around dolls. This, in essence, was the beginning of her life as a sculptor.

Norma was also gifted in drawing, and though she lived in the Bronx, she attended the High School of Music and Art and later Cooper Union in Manhattan. But she would always race home to be with her mother. She married in 1959 and because, as she puts it, “can only do one thing at a time,” she set her art aside and took up the business of raising a family in Fairfield County with her husband.

Yet all the while she continued making art, mostly clothes for the kids and crafty things for the home. Not satisfied, she started sending design patterns to women’s magazines, and readers loved her clever wall hangings and pillows. But the artist in Norma was still frustrated, and slowly she took up crocheting again, and branched into more elaborate media,

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like fiber, hog gut, paint and resin. She joined local artist groups and began showing her work — and winning awards. But life, and her art, underwent a dramatic change when Norma's beloved mother passed away in 1986, after suffering from Alzheimer's for several years. Norma began doing larger, more ambitious pieces, which reflected deeper themes. The first major piece after her mother's death was called "Permeance." This small work (fourteen by twelve-and-a-half by four inches), part of the Wadsworth Atheneum's permanent collection, has red flames emanating from a transparent box — a two-tiered casket with bodies on both levels. That was followed by a sculpture of a head half in and half out of another coffin-like box; that piece is titled *I Can't Touch You*. Issues of fragility/strength, freedom/entrapment, body/soul, permanence/loss may have always interested Norma, but it wasn't until she watched her mother fade from a strong force in her life to a wisp of a woman, to a memory, that Norma made them an integral part of her art.

As a result, she's won the attention, and respect, of top institutions, including prestigious museums. "Norma Minkowitz has taken textile art to new heights," says Jane Adlin, an assistant curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. "Her shellac-stiffened and painted crochet sculptures emerge as unique and brilliant forms expressing self-conscious ideas and worldly concerns, psychological complexities and metaphor."

Ursula Ilse-Neuman, curator of the Museum of Arts & Design in New York, adds that Norma's "emotionally charged and masterfully crafted constructions [and] strikingly evocative forms, most notably the duality of their inner and outer physical and spiritual worlds, never fail to astound."

It's not all deep, dark and heavy, though. Norma's work, while provocative, is beautiful and ethereal, and sometimes just plain fun. Pointing to a small frame on a wall, she says, "Look, I crocheted a pencil!" In fact, her studio feels more like a school art room, with paints, resins and found objects (wood, roots, bark) scattered willy-nilly. Finished pieces compete with works in progress on walls, tables and chairs. Body parts jut out of the oddest corners, and imaginary worlds collide with working surfaces. No wonder her four grandchildren (ages four to thirteen) love to come in and "play" with Grandma. Recently, the youngest, Jack, asked to crochet on top of one of her finished works.

Ever the doting grandmother, she let him. "But when he left, I ripped it out," she admits.

Her most autobiographical work is a stunning piece called "Russian Heart." Says Norma, "It's a connection to my roots. My mother and grandmother always wore these densely embroidered Russian peasant blouses with reds and greens. The anatomically correct heart has that pattern, and a collar — or aura — around it, showing the delicateness and fragility of life." What about the bone piercing the organ? Her mother died of a massive heart attack.

At any given time, Norma will be working on three or four pieces. Rather

than impose artificial deadlines on herself, she allows herself to be inspired. Every day — after a good workout at the gym or on a bike — the one-time marathon runner will go upstairs and see what's attracting her attention. She may paint, shellac, cut, revise or bring a piece downstairs and crochet, which is still her favorite manner of expression.

"Each stitch is different," she says. "The human hand can't do with rigid wire what is possible with fiber, so every stitch is unique, creating a different movement and linear pattern. There is strength, fluidity and fragility in that movement."

Crocheting is also a meditative process for Norma, who stitches while

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NORMA MINKOWITZ'S psychologically complex work always has a thread of tension that comes from confronting life head on.

FAR RIGHT: A sculpture called "Remembrance."

OPPOSITE: Norma says her sculptures with web-like walls conveying a sense of inside and outside, can be seen as three-dimensional projections of line drawings.



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listening to the radio or watching TV with her husband in the evening. "I used to stitch on planes, but they took my hooks away," she says. "In the back of my mind, I'm always thinking of saving things and holding them together in protection. I guess I'm protecting this thing by going around and around it. I'm always covering and exposing at the same time."

Her goals, beyond seeing her children and grandchildren as often as possible, are to keep improving as an artist — and to be recognized as a fine artist rather than a craftsperson. "Craft art is about how it's done," she says. "Fine art is about the message and concept." **W**

Norma Minkowitz will be giving a lecture and signing her new book, Portfolio Collection, at the Museum of Arts & Design, 40 W. 53rd Street in Manhattan, on April 28 at 6 p.m.