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from trash to treasure

Resolute about recycling and creative reuse, **Harriete Estel Berman** takes a tongue-in-cheek approach to crafting tin-can masterpieces



The teacups from Harriete's "Consuming Conversation" series, LEFT and ABOVE, each take five hours and 9 to 13 pieces of tin to make. Stackable because of a hidden magnet inside, the teacups feature imagery from familiar products and cultural icons. "I'm constantly influenced and inspired by advertising and pop culture," says Harriete. ➤



TOP RIGHT: CONVERSATION 4, FROM "CONSUMING CONVERSATION" SERIES. EACH CUP WITH SAUCER: 2 5/8"; SAUCER DIAMETER APPROXIMATELY 6"

LONG BEFORE CAN CRUSHERS, CURBSIDE service, and neatly marked containers for plastic and glass, metalsmith Harriete Berman considered herself a "recycling evangelist." She was never one to let a good thing go to waste.

While touting the benefits of recycling to friends and neighbors and actively promoting public recycling programs in her Northern California community, Harriete also looked for ways to use landfill-destined materials in her art. Despite her traditional background in jewelry design and silver hollowware, she had always been intrigued by scrap metals.

So, in 1988, with a few basic concepts in mind, she started saving every piece of pre-printed tin she could buy or salvage and soon amassed a large collection of cracker boxes, tin cans, cookie containers, and old metal dollhouses. "I really liked the idea of reusing material rather than buying new," she says now. "It seemed silly to throw out something perfectly good."

Over the past 15 years, Harriete has cut up thousands of cans and more than 300 vintage tin dollhouses to create a lively array of sculptural metal art pieces. Her work, which includes quilt-patterned boxes, playful teacups, one-of-a-kind jewelry, and whimsical candy dispensers, like "3M&m,"

LEFT, is widely exhibited in museums and galleries throughout the world.



the search for scrap metal

Even with thousands of cans at her disposal, Harriete still struggles to find what she's looking for. "I'm very particular about color," she admits. "And do you know how hard it is to get 100 pieces of tin that have the same

shade of red and a picture of a woman on them?" The hunt for material never ends. Harriete's father, who frequents flea markets on the East Coast, has long been a great source. And now, as word of Harriete's work spreads, she often receives "gifts," such as these lunchboxes and lids, LEFT, from unlikely donors. Friends in her exercise class, her children's orthodontist, and a New York City curator have all recently shared their scrap.





With a healthy stash of ready-to-use metal arranged by color and theme, ABOVE, Harriete can easily act on inspira-



"I like to gestate over the perfect piece of tin."

tion. Initially, she does a quick sketch of her design and then uses the sketch to build a cardboard model. "I invest a lot of time in getting my size and proportion right with the cardboard," she says. "But honestly, selecting the material is the most difficult part of the process."



Harriete spent six months tweaking and building her vanity chair pieces, "Fading Identity," TOP RIGHT, and "Material Identity," RIGHT. Much of her time was spent searching for metal that could be shaped to look like fabric. When she stopped to rethink her ideas or solve a technical problem, she also worked on several other projects. ➔



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: "FADING IDENTITY," 19"H X 15"W (AT LEGS), "MATERIA IDENTITY," 38 25"H X 17 25"W X 11" DEEP, "CONVERSATION 3," EACH CUP WITH SAUCER 2 5"H, SAUCER DIAMETER APPROXIMATELY 6"

ARTIST'S WORKSHOP



In a testament to Harriete's trial-and-error method, she spent 70 hours making the first of her teacups. It takes her 10 minutes just to open one tin can, and that doesn't include the pounding and flattening that follow. She completes every step of the process in her studio, **BELOW RIGHT**, a converted two-car garage just steps from her San Mateo home. "I have to squeeze to use every inch," says Harriete, "but I love it."



"I have lots of *ideas* brewing at once."

TOP RIGHT: 'CASEINATED ARRANGEMENT', BLACK OR WHITE; 'COFFEEPOT' 12"H X 13"W, CUP, 2 1/2"H X 5 1/2"
BELOW LEFT: 'CONSUMING CONVERSATION 10,' EACH CUP WITH SAUCER 7 1/2" HEIGHT, SAUCER DIAMETER APPROXIMATELY 6"

AN ACCOMPLISHED ARTIST AND SAVVY businesswoman, Harriete has built her career on one conviction: "It doesn't serve anyone to make art and keep it in your closet." She estimates that at least half of her time is spent making contacts with galleries and promoting her work. As she sees it, the romantic notion of dreaming up art and brooding in a smoky café is ridiculous.

"I work very hard," Harriete insists, "and I don't know any successful artists who haven't done the same. You absolutely have to put yourself out there, even if you'd rather be holed up in your studio."

To help new and ill-informed craftspeople of all mediums, Harriete recently began writing "The Professional Guidelines," a volume of checklists, sample contracts, and basic business principles that can be found at www.snagmetalsmith.org. Harriete hopes it will be well utilized. "I feel a real responsibility toward my community, both to my neighbors and to fellow artists, and I just hope I can make a difference." 🍪



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