

OF A FASHIONABLE NATURE



She has created fanciful corsets that will never be worn and ties that won't adorn a single neck. She's even made a collection of dramatic umbrellas, though none will keep an outfit dry.

Despite those practical particulars, there is no denying artist Catherine Latson's work draws influences from the world of fashion.

That the umbrellas are made of leaves, the corsets have sported seashells and the ties both moss and feathers give equal nod to the importance of nature to her work.

Latson, a Tarrytown resident who works out of a Yonkers studio, sums it up quite eloquently on her website: "My work springs from the overlap between the natural world's innovations and our own... My work does not preach. Nature is the text and a full-fledged collaborator."

And that is more than clear on a recent morning in Latson's light-filled corner studio, part of the YoHo Artist Studios at the Alexander Smith Carpet Mills Building.

A muslin-colored corset sits on a table, fragments of the palest green anemone shells having recently been stitched onto its vintage surface as others await their turn.

Nearby, twisted vines have been turned into one-of-a-kind chandeliers and sconces, while ink-black feathers artfully drape to form the sleekest of neckties.

Overhead, one of her classic umbrella creations hovers.

Through the umbrellas, she says she has learned about leaves themselves.

"The beech trees hang onto their leaves all winter, and they're this wonderful vanilla color," Latson says. "Oak leaves are fun because of the spaces between them."

Harvesting the elements by hand is part of the process, giving Latson a chance to know her materials.

Of the leaves, for example, she notes "You can buy them, but why?"

And she also learns a lot about the nature of things and knows now to "stay away from the really fragile. It's hard because they are the most beautiful."

Latson's current work was spurred by a wiry bunch of vines collected on a walk.

"I dragged it back and said 'I'm going to make something.'"

What others saw as a nuisance, she saw as an artistic element.

"Nobody wants them because they're invasive," she says.

She has long collected others' discards, at one moment drawing attention to an artful sweep of a copper wire that may find itself in a future work.

"There I was, Dumpster-diving for piano wire."

Now that her work is better known, she adds she will also "frequently find bundles of things outside my door, bundles of bark."

THE ROAD TO ART

Latson says she grew up in so many places that she has a ready answer when asked her origins.

"People say 'Where are you from?' and I say, 'Right now, New York.'"

Latson studied both biology and studio art at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn. For a time, she would work as a medical illustrator before embarking on a 20-year career as a professional scenic artist, painting sets and special effects for film, TV and city operas, ballet and theater companies across the country.

"Then babies came along and that turned everything on its head," she says.

She lived for a time in Hawaii, where her husband was working at the Punahou School. The family moved to Tarrytown 16 years ago when he joined Hackley School.

With college tuition looming for her two sons – now graduated – Latson shifted gears and "cranked out a nursing degree at 40."

She was working in the field for seven or eight years, she says, but felt something lacking.

"I thought I was going to lose my mind not having the right brain going," she says of her return to art, as painting gave way to sculpture and her current work.

Today, Latson is a hospice nurse – working mostly nights and weekends – and spends time in her studio most every day.

"It's a great balance. It's turned out to be the perfect balance."

FASHIONING WORK

Latson's studio has an element of fashion to it, complete with mannequin form, spools of vintage thread, sketches and swatches.

"I learned to sew as a young girl," she says. And these days, she adds, "I find myself sewing more and more."

Her current work in the "Garment Series," as she has described it, "explores the language of clothing and offers unconventional versions of the packages we put ourselves in, and perhaps, too often define ourselves by."

It definitely makes a statement, from the fanciful gown where fern forms a flowing skirt to another necktie where moss takes center stage.

Throughout, Latson goes for the imperfect or what she calls "Dr. Seuss" effect. Her asymmetry is deliberate. There is a story in what is past its prime.

"Not that I intend anything when I'm creating this," she says, preferring to allow her work to be interpreted by the viewer, each creating "a different story."

But one can't help see some sort of statement, even when it occurs naturally. A corset-style framed work on one wall, for example, is a study in delicate hydrangea petals. It began, Latson says, in a rich hue but has faded, taking on a most wistful quality.

Though working alone, Latson says she finds inspiration in her neighboring YoHo artists, especially stylist and vintage clothing dealer Jessie Matrullo of Bohemian Royalty. Latson might obtain an Edwardian or Victorian corset from her and "start taking it apart, piece by piece."

Latson says it was vintage clothing, baby items in frames, that got her thinking about fashion-as-art in a new way.

"I understand vintage, nostalgia, but there's something haunted about them," she says.

In her work with natural materials, Latson transitioned her art into the realm of clothing – with her own spin.

"I stuck with the organic materials. The palette is endless. The textures are endless."

But Latson says she doesn't flip through fashion magazines, for example, looking for a dress to recreate in, say, moss.

"I do find myself taking note of interesting forms," she adds. But they will be translated by her vision, "I don't find myself wanting to copy forms, silhouettes or textures even."

She attends fashion events, such as the Alexander McQueen and Charles James exhibitions at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, but again, more for an overall impression rather than direct sourcing.

"A lot of this project, no pun intended, is very organic," she says. "It's more researching structures than it is styles."

To her, the natural elements are key to an overall impression.

"I want it to look like it's been washing along on the shore for a month," she says, showing off a recent find, a piece of well-worn leather that has fascinated her.

The process of creating a work, which starts with sketches and often ends with museum-quality framing, can take up to a year.

SHOW TIME

"The studio can be very solitary which is nice, but it's really nice to have feedback," Latson says.

Her work has been featured at the Greenburgh Nature Center and in the Macy's Flower Show in Manhattan and Philadelphia. She has exhibited at the Architectural Digest Home Design Show in Manhattan as well.

Recently, Latson was part of group shows at both the Blue Door Gallery in Yonkers and Gallery 66 NY in Cold Spring.

Prior to the "Fashion as Art II" exhibition at Gallery 66 NY, owner Barbara Galazzo didn't know Latson's work, which was chosen by artist and show juror Carla Goldberg.

"She just submitted something to the gallery," Galazzo says of Latson. "The 'Fashion as Art' was an open call so we had people from all over the country."

Latson's work, Galazzo says, is just "stunning."

"It's so original. Her piece was simple-looking but complicated in its execution... I loved having it in the gallery."

Latson says CSM Art & Frame in Chatham, N.J., started to carry her work last spring and she has what she calls a "really nice relationship" with Pergola in Litchfield County.

With Latson, time and nature provide endless inspiration.

"Every season has something different. It's a different menu every season."

For Latson, being in the studio is its own reward, preferable to being out selling her work.

"I'd much rather be here playing by myself," she says with a smile.

After all, there's an endless supply of leaves, shells and so much more to spark her creativity.

"I always have five or six things going on. It's like a playground."

For more, visit catherinelatson.com.