

Lorraine Chesin, M.S.W. '77

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

By David Brickman

You may never have heard of Lorraine Chesin. I hadn't, either, before her unassuming but strong abstract works began appearing a couple of years ago at the annual one-night shows sponsored by Historic Albany Foundation.

In 2008, I bought one of her pieces and had it hanging in the living room before I realized it was both an abstract design and a quite accurate rendering of a view out a downtown window. The same understated, dual-purpose nature of Chesin's paintings was abundantly in evidence a few months ago at a two-person show she shared with photographer Susan Gill Spellmeyer in Albany.

Uncommon Perspectives featured six paintings and about a dozen needlepoints by Chesin. Her work has the energetic freshness of a young artist's, but feels much more steeped in time. The needlepoints hark back to the days of '60s macramé, yet their Modernism really harks back much further, to the Arts and Crafts movement. Chesin's paintings are Modernist, too: They closely resemble work by Arshile Gorky and Arthur Dove in their fusion of shape, color, and line to both reveal and conceal their subjects, which are groups of people.

I have no idea how many serious artists have chosen to work in needlepoint – or, for that matter, embroidery, hooked rugs, tapestries or weaving – but I sense in the textile media two key aspects: They are traditionally feminine, and they are an “underdog” (like other “crafts”) in the art world. Chesin makes her own designs and works them into very carefully assembled constructs of colored thread, often incorporating complex striping, and they are representative of typical subjects: landscape, still life, portrait. They may break new ground, but they also tread on familiar ground quite comfortably, and they

do it very well, while hovering exactly halfway between representation and abstraction.

Chesin's paintings are also in that realm, perhaps a couple of shades closer to representation, but they revel so much in the expressiveness of paint and in interesting palette ranges that I find them more visual than meaningful. Still, their often playful titles bear out their connection to the world beyond the studio. *Girl With A Career* may be autobiographical, or it may refer to today's relentless demand for nurses. *Hearts Away*, with its four figures apparently bearing gifts, could have a number of interpretations.

In short, Chesin is both a mature and emerging artist, whose careers have been as multifaceted as her creativity. She retired in 2002 after 10 years as the Rensselaer County Commissioner of Mental Health; before that, she was a social worker, and before that, a high school art teacher. Chesin was 35 when she earned an art degree from Skidmore College; she received her M.S.W. from UAlbany in 1977.

Lorraine Chesin is married to Sorrell Chesin, Ph.D., associate vice president for University Development at UAlbany.



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Gary Gold, B.S.'70