

Arts & Entertainment

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Halvorsen constructs a world of possibility

By Sue Harrison
 BANNER STAFF

For 25 years Elspeth Halvorsen has been constructing intricate glass-fronted boxes in all sizes from tiny table-top tableaux to large, human-sized wall hangings. Within the frozen confines of each box are worlds on pause, a held breath in the midst of life. Halvorsen will show a selection of her box constructions at the Robyn Watson Gallery, 432 Commercial St., Provincetown beginning with a reception from 7 to 11 p.m. this Friday and running through Aug. 10. Also showing is M.M. Battelle, who is exhibiting her cyanotype photographs.

Halvorsen is friendly, courteous and gracious, but there is an almost shy edge about her. She's not the type to jump up and down and beat her breast and tell you how great she is, although maybe she should. She has amassed a solid body of constructionist work over the past two-plus decades that are delicious in their precision and intriguing in their symbolism and intricate lighting effects created with mirrors, magnifying glasses and portholes. The way she creates unusual ways for light to get into her boxes and then be channeled around inside them becomes as much a part of the work as the physical items she puts inside.

Much of her work is spare and geometric, with backgrounds of brushed aluminum in some pieces and painted surfaces or photos in others. Chains of all varieties appear to hang, creating the sense that they could move at any moment but they are firmly in place. In others she puts in swings, and they do swing. There are ladders, sometimes real, sometimes a painted version, that appear to lead out of the boxes, but a closer look reveals that rungs are missing. What looks like deliverance has a hidden, more dangerous side.

She did two boxes, one called "Escape" and the other "Return." In "Escape" a ladder snakes up the middle and out the top of the box, and in "Return" a swing hangs from long lines, waiting to become

airborne.

Looking at those two boxes, she says, "My two children asked, 'Which am I?' and I said you have to pick. They both wanted to be 'Return.'"

When asked about the swings and ladders she reaches back into memory.

"The swing I guess is from childhood, my own and my children's," she says. "As a child, I lived in Purdy, N.Y. and had a swing from a tree. We used to swing on it as high as we could and then let go and jump off. We pretended to be Tarzan." She smiles to remember the thrill of pumping hard, going higher and then turning loose. "I was a tomboy," she confesses and adds, "It was like flying."

The first ladder she says she recalls was up around Boothbay, Maine, where her family sometimes went in the summer.

"We would go down to the dock to get seafood, and there was a ladder," she says. "The tide was tremendously different, and



Halvorsen's upcoming show at Robyn Watson Gallery is dedicated to her mother, Colette, who died earlier this year.

when tide was low you had to go down a very long ladder. It seemed like an enormous climb when I was little."

As a child Halvorsen was sometimes ill and spent time in bed. That led to her earliest artwork.

"I grew up with it practically taken for granted that I would be an artist," she says. "I guess I took to the materials more [than my siblings did]. Whenever I was in bed they would give me art materials. I wish I had those pieces now but they are all lost. My father taught us to ski very young so I painted kids sledding and skiing."

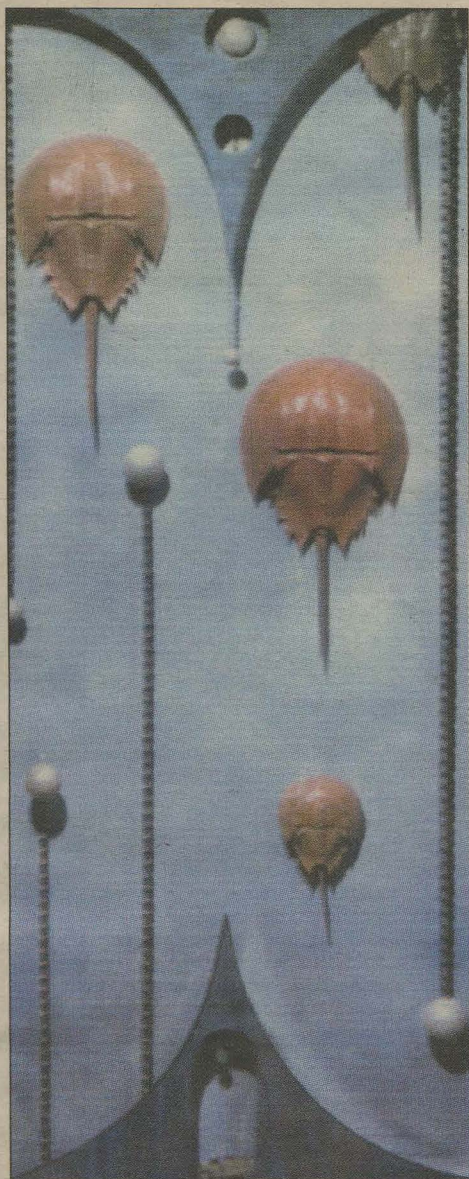
Her father also taught her how to use a hammer and saw, skills that are indispensable to her now.

Her dad was a research scientist and her mother, Colette, was an artist who painted landscapes and showed in San Miguel for 25 years. Colette's mother, Rene Finch Sund, was also a painter, and in Halvorsen's bedroom is a portrait of her mother painted by her grandmother. In the living room is a sepia-toned photo of Colette with flowers tucked around it. Colette died earlier this year and this show is dedicated to her memory.

Halvorsen has created boxes inspired by her mother, one of which holds a drawing her mother did.

"She couldn't really see the last 15 years," she says of her mother's final decline.

"It was very hard not to be able to show her my work."



"To the Sea," assemblage by Halvorsen, features horseshoe crabs, an animal with which she confesses a long fascination.



PHOTOS SUE HARRISON

Elspeth Halvorsen outside the Provincetown Art Association.

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When asked how she came to make the boxes, Halvorsen says her earlier work was in painting and photography but a serendipitous encounter with a woman in Chicago 25 years ago changed her focus.

"She was doing little boxes, and I thought, gee, I'd like to try some assemblage," she says. "At first I used my photographs in the boxes and then began to add found objects. Next, I began to make things to go inside, and later I got into color and painting and then geometry. Someday I'd like to have a wall completely covered with these, like an installation."

Her earliest work, she says, was very rustic. "It had to be old and made up of things that were from the dump," she says. Since then she has gone through a number of material choices. She worked with brushed aluminum for a while but says lighting it created problems. She began to paint the background and that's when the trompe l'oeil bits began to sneak in.

The geometry also harkens back to childhood. She loved geometry and often incorpo-

rates circles, arcs, triangles and other shapes into her box's interiors.

Much of her work, she says, revolves around the horizon line, and she puts in moons, suns and planets, though they are not always obvious, sometimes seen only through a mirror.

She still enjoys incorporating found objects and points out a box with a metal WW I soldier inside.

"I found a little soldier when I was planting tulips," she says. "It looked like a lump of rusted metal but I wondered. I banged it and he just popped out."

She has done a number of boxes using the ancient horseshoe crab as a design element, sometimes mixing in dried, twisted skates salvaged from the wrack line.

"I've always been fascinated by the horseshoe crab," she says. "It is one of the least changed of any living creature. It's been around for millions of years. There is something sort of warrior-like about it, maybe the helmet shape."

Halvorsen has been married to artist and art historian Tony Vevers for 53 years. They live in a snug house on Bradford



One of the several "bird assemblages" recently done in a series.

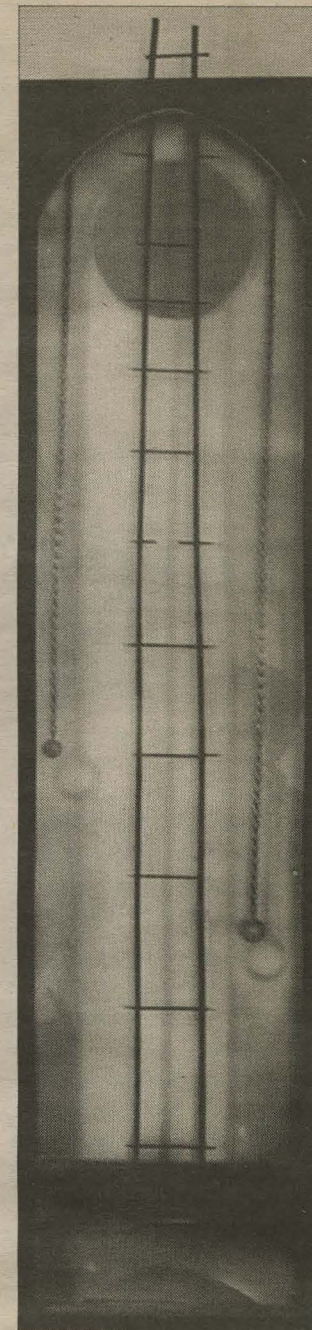
Street they bought from Mark Rothko in 1964, right after Tony sold a big painting. For much of their life here she worked out back under an awning but recently she has had a small studio added.

Her two children, Tabitha and Stephanie, are also artists — Tabitha paints, Stephanie works in video.

A few years ago Tony had a

stroke, and their life has changed to accommodate that. Halvorsen finds it has crept into her artwork as well.

"I did a bird series after Tony had his stroke," she says, pulling out boxes with metal birds perched inside. "They are all called 'Waiting.' I was waiting for Tony to get better. No one ever told me he wouldn't, so I'm still waiting." □



"Escape" blurs the line between the objects actually in the box and painted trompe l'oeil echoes of those same items.