

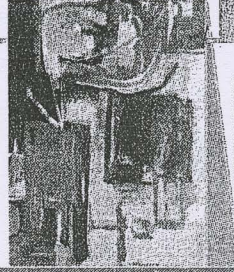
Arts & Entertainment

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JENNY HUMPHREYS strikes again

Installation artist pushes the envelope with latest show

By Gerry Desautels

BANNER CORRESPONDENT

Perched on high in an off-season loft apartment, artist Jenny Humphreys enjoys a bird's eye view of Provincetown Harbor. The squawks of seagulls settled on her rooftop are nature's audio backdrop, while below, the drone of slow-moving vehicles on Commercial Street is muffled by the shut windows of Humphreys' temporary winter nest.

Yet things are not usually what they seem, especially on the Outer Cape in the dead of winter. Humphreys is living proof. A second-year Fine Arts Work Center fellow, she has been the mastermind and creator of numerous controversial performance and installation art works, ever since she descended on the town in 1993. The diminutive five-foot Yale undergraduate is about to offer up her latest installation art at a group show opening Friday in the Silas-Kenyon Gallery at the Schoolhouse Center, 494 Commercial St., Provincetown.

Many of Humphreys' shows have dealt with her family's Puritan and Southern history, and most have included her trademark embroidery stitching, and an element of food, another passion. On Friday she unveils her latest, an imposing installation piece, "Indie's Legacy."

The evocative and emotionally charged work represents a plantation heiress's 1861 inheritance of 70 slaves — each of which is represented by small rations of corn-filled burlap bags embroidered with the slave's name and an assigned monetary value. The bags are individually connected by threads braided with Humphreys' chestnut-colored hair, all tethered to various positions on a maiden's dress mounted on the gallery wall. Humphreys used her own once-long locks in acknowledgment of the slave ownership history of her Virginia ancestors, and she chose the dress to represent a

real-life plantation owner named Indiana Fletcher.

"At the very last minute last summer, I was called to Virginia for a residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in Sweetbriar College for Women, in Sweetbriar, Virginia," says Humphreys. "My boyfriend and I had put our stuff in storage, preparing to move out of town, so I hastily went down to our storage and grabbed what I could for materials to work with from my month down south."

"When I arrived at Sweetbriar, a 3,500-acre campus, I quickly sensed that the grounds were much more than a college. I inquired and soon found out that it had indeed been a plantation. And so I started to research and found out that the college had been left by the last heir of a huge estate plantation, a single and thin-waisted woman named Indiana Fletcher. Her father was a Yankee from Vermont who moved south and 'married' into the concept of slavery."

In her research, Humphreys also learned that the Yankee had acquired much land; and in his will of 1860, 150 slaves were left to his two daughters. "Indiana was about my age, single in her late 30s, and I got interested about this woman having so much power, running the plantation during the Civil War," says Humphreys. "Later, Fletcher had a daughter who had died, and willed the estate to a college for 'the edification of white girls.' That will was eventually challenged and opened to blacks as well."

"It was such a potent place for me as an artist, and I started to think further about the land as a former slave colony," Humphreys says. "How many bodies were buried there that no one knew anything about? That's when I decided to do my piece, 'Indie's Legacy,' at the college."

The installation dress was given to Humphreys by her best

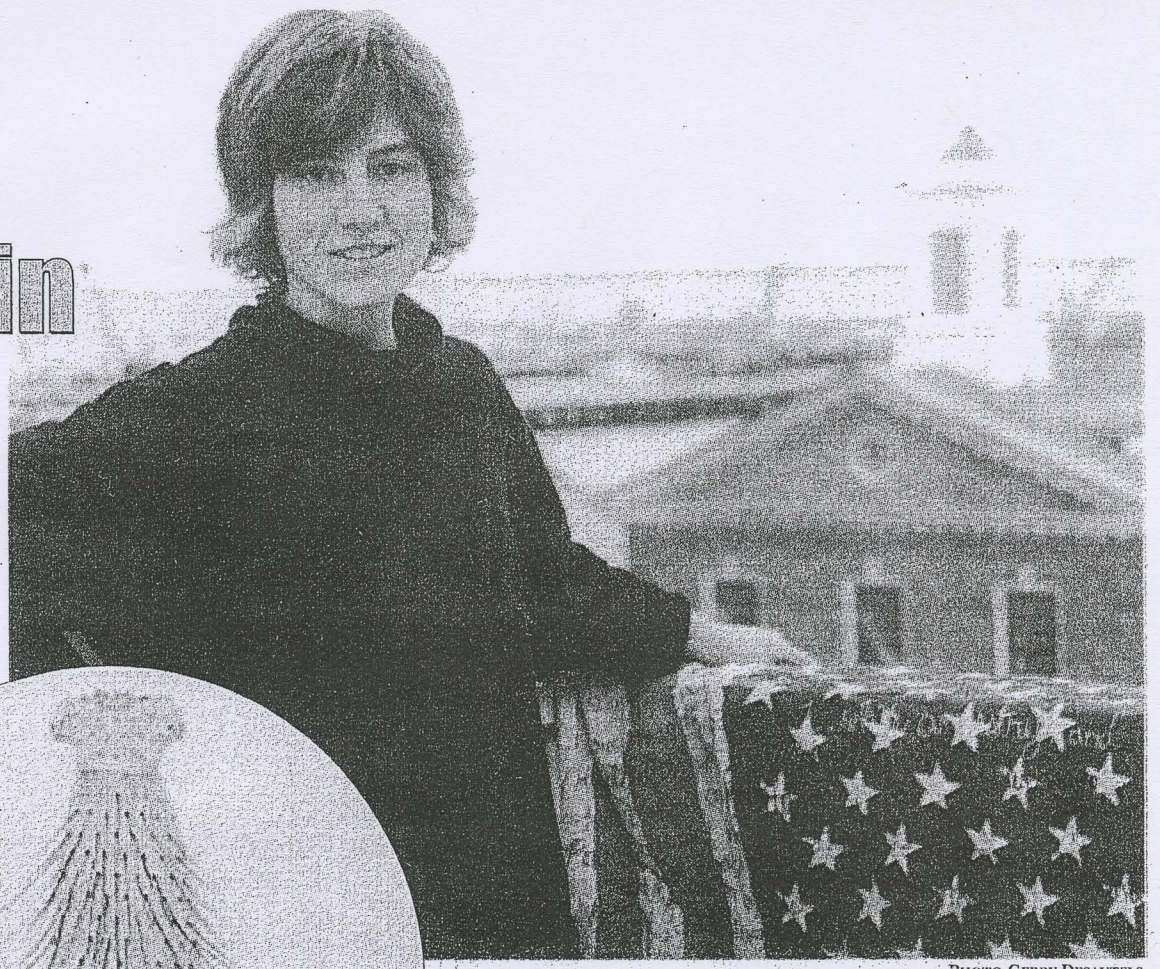
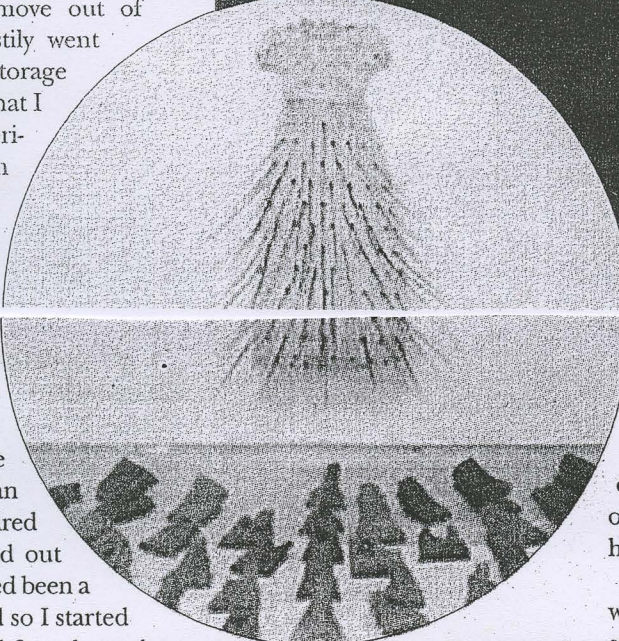


PHOTO GERRY DESAUTELS

Jenny Humphreys, with embroidered flag, at her residence overlooking Provincetown Harbor.



Humphreys' installation, "Indie's Legacy," opens Friday at the Schoolhouse Center.

friend as possible content for future work. Along with a flag, it was one of the few staples she brought with her to her residency program. A long size 10 adorned with machine-embroidered flower-like circles of topaz blue, pink and green, the dress is suggestive of a southern maiden with a thin waist, similar to Indiana Fletcher.

"I wanted to have some real connection to it, something kind of visceral. Since I had few materials with me, I realized I had my long hair. And since I wanted to be physically connected to the piece, I gradually cut it and wove it into the design. I wanted to be physically connected to this woman. I also was thinking about the slaves named in this will, all with values, some at \$0."

Humphreys' introspection translates into a brilliant metaphor of the 70 slaves tied and dependent on their owner, and the more complicated issue of Fletcher's relationship to them. Humphreys, herself a

13th generation American and descendent of slave owners, cathartically expresses her own remorse and sadness over history in the piece.

"I've always said that I do my work for myself, but clearly with some of the things I'm doing now ... it's always surprising to me that people find something in my work," confesses Humphreys. "At Sweetbriar, I was shy about my piece, but when some of the black staff members came to the opening, many were moved and admitted that know one talks about this stuff — slavery, racism, feminism. The kinds of conversations that come out of my work are often very rewarding, especially since most of my work is done on my own. I do these pieces to shove me out of my shyness."

Calm and cool, Humphreys, the daughter of academic artist parents, is herself a Yale University graduate. Articulate but vulnerable, she has put in her time in Provincetown — almost 10 years — as a self-driven artist who works in restaurants to finance her minimalist way of life and feed her uncanny ability to create, invoke and inspire passion and conviction in her work. By now she has become well-known from a long series of edgy installation and performance art projects with food: BBQ with a Prisoner, installed in Jay Critchley's septic theater; a

skinned lamb frozen in a block of ice; a baby (Humphreys) in a canopied cradle in a sea of salt water taffy; a photograph series of her naked on video in a barbed wire hoop dress adorned with candlelit cakes; candy legs strewn about at the former small pox cemetery; and, of course, her quilt (embroidered with crude vernacular for the female sex organ) which stirred up another sleepy winter art season in 1996.

Humphreys' Schoolhouse show also features a companion piece completed this past season which describes her personal connection to the work through the medium of a vertically embroidered American flag of red thread stitched in her signature cursive script with words of angst, introspection and profundity: "Back in the 1630s, long before Virginia was for lovers, my ancestors, the Wests, arrived ... they brought with them white ancestry and a strong desire for unlimited personal wealth ... they soon saved enough money to purchase their own people and who because they are black, by Virginia law, would belong to the Wests ... Who knows why then a certain West, Benjamin, left behind all the comforts of home and penniless moved out to the frontier ... This story is what qualifies me as a member of the FFV, First Families of Virginia."

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Certainly the female voice is what emerges from Humphreys' clipped speech. Her polite nature denotes her Puritanical and southern heritage with a New England dose of wisdom and shocking insight to her world and our own — sometimes glaringly. In this case, Humphreys's soul intrudes her work, softly yet

strongly with passionate and subtle stitches, braided with bittersweet melancholy.

The work of Jenny Humphreys, Didier Corallo and MaryAlice Johnston shows Friday, March 1 through April 1, 2002 in the Silas-Kenyon Gallery of Provincetown's Schoolhouse Center, 494 Commercial Street. An opening artists' reception kicks off the show this Friday from 6 – 9 p.m.