

ZOOM

An up-close guide to books, galleries, people & places

Radar It Started with a Kazoo

IN THE 1950S AND '60S, HARVEY Comics featured a character called Little Dot, a strangely obsessive little girl with a compulsion to decorate everything with polka dots.

Artist Jan Huling is similarly afflicted, though her fetish is beads. Inside Huling's brownstone in Hoboken, New Jersey, tabletops, shoes, dinnerware, dolls, even musical instruments are covered in dazzling colored beads. Only their fur has saved Huling's two cats, apparently.

Huling began beading about nine years ago after her sister, a jewelry designer, showed her a Pez dispenser she'd adorned; Huling's first effort was a kazoo. Initially she applied beads the size of poppy seeds by pushing glue through a syringe, which eventually resulted in a diagnosis of carpal tunnel



Left:
A Gentle Man of Color, 2010
34 x 16 x 10 in.

Below, top:
Globe, 2010
16 x 12 in. diam.

Below bottom:
MiCorazon, 2010
6 x 4 x 3 in.

Opposite, left:
Messenger, 2011
17.25 x 7 x 6 in.

Opposite, center:
Ophiuchus, 2011
16.5 x 9 x 4.5 in.

Opposite, right:
CatBird Seat, 2011
16.25 x 6 x 5.5 in.



Photos: Phil Huling



syndrome. A foot-controlled air pen saved her hand. Surprisingly, Huling, who works only in natural light because she finds it easier on the eyes, swears that the painstaking process has actually improved her vision. "In the beginning I wore two pairs of glasses on top of each other," she says. Now she's down to one.

Two years ago, Huling began beading full time, leaving a steady gig as a product designer in the gift and home department at Avon, best known for its beauty products. How does she decide what to ornament? "Things just call out to me," she says. In a storage closet at Avon, she found six brand-new Kewpie dolls, collectibles because nobody makes them anymore. "These were coming home with Mama," she says. "I pissed off collectors, because immediately I stripped them and plastered them with beads."

Her work reveals some interesting fixations. Huling stuck fake dog poop on a Kewpie's head and beaded it in bright blue and fiery red, calling the \$3,200 piece *Poopyhead*. "I have a fourth-grade boy's sense of humor," she admits; all her creatures, great and small, display highly decorative posterior orifices.

Moving toward the higher end of taste, Huling creates resplendent blue-beaded teapots, a bejeweled bird perched atop each one. The vessels serve up irony as magnificent objets d'art with \$4,200 price tags disguising 12-buck teapots from Chinatown.

Is it art? Or craft? Huling is flattered by either term. But, she recalls, finding her niche was very difficult. "I thought, 'How do I sell this?'"

She placed her work on Etsy.com, the crafters' website, and sold zip. "Instead, I got hundreds of wonderful comments – long, thoughtful exegeses, treating me like an artist."

She tried high-end craft shows, shelling out for pricey displays and hotel rooms. People gazed at her \$15,000 child-size grand piano, which she made over several months, and left with a \$15 charm. "I thought, 'Did I do a really stupid thing by quitting Avon?'"

Then in July 2009 she got a mass e-mail from the Lyons Wier Gallery in New York with an interesting pitch. Each weekend in the summer, when galleries are about as happening as mausoleums, Lyons Wier pledged to display any unknown artist's work – first come, first served. The best-

selling artist would win a solo show.

One Friday before noon, Huling arrived with an umbrella and beach chair, prepared to wait until the gallery doors opened for weekend traffic Saturday at 9 a.m. "Michael Lyons [Wier], the owner, tried to persuade me to return later, but couldn't guarantee my spot first in line, so I didn't budge. He looked at me like I was nuts." Come Saturday, Huling landed the gallery's most coveted spot: the window. "When the sun hit those beads, it was magic," she says.

Indeed. In 10 hours, Huling raked in \$10,000. She won a month-long solo exhibit that fall. She had another show there last November and is now a gallery mainstay. The gallery represented her at two SOFA shows last year and represented her again in April at SOFA NY.

What's next? Huling cast her eyes over the found objects in her studio, resting upon a Christ child in a manger. "Jesus might get it."

Evidently no one is safe. Even the cats are nervous.

—GINI SIKES

www.janhuling.com/
Gini Sikes is an author and journalist based in New York.

Shows To See

Gallery shows, listed A–Z by state. View complete calendar: americancraftmag.org

CA / Los Angeles
Craft in America Study Center
One by One: An Exploration of the Book Arts
to May 14
craftinamerica.org/studycenter
Works from a large group of book artists, including Julie Chen, Kathleen Walkup, and Harry and Sandra Reese, demonstrate the diversity of the field.

DC / Washington
Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum
History in the Making: Renwick Craft Invitational 2011
to Jul. 31
americanart.si.edu/renwick
In its fifth year, this biennial celebration of craft and mastery features ceramic artist Cliff Lee, furniture maker Matthias Pliessnig, glass artist Judith Schaechter, and silversmith Ubaldo Vitali.

DC / Washington
The Textile Museum
Green: The Color and the Cause
Apr. 16 – Sep. 11
textilemuseum.org
This exploration of green textiles (below) and the color's cultural significance includes a museum first: two site-specific installations, one a paper sculpture of a coastal ecosystem, the other a grass-seeded, lace-covered arbor in the museum garden.

HI / Honolulu
The Contemporary Museum
Steven and William Ladd: 9769 Radio Drive
to May 8
tcmhi.org
In their first solo museum exhibition, the Brooklyn-based siblings have fused craft, design, and fashion to create drawings, sculptures, and installations.