

Turning trash into treasure



The Shuttered Adirondack, life size, window shutters



Hand Waxed Cement Fruit, life size, cement bowl with cement fruit

A while back, Phyllis Hartley was making a chair fashioned out of old house shutters she had painted a vivid turquoise. It had wooden arms from a scavenged chair whose best days were over. Despite its recycled parts, the chair stood strong and functional—but in its creator's mind, it was incomplete. "It needs something," Hartley recalls thinking. "What can it be?"

With all due respect, Hartley's backyard could be mistaken for the part of Falmouth's town dump affectionately known as "The Pick of the Litter." In fact, some of the things you'll find in her yard have come from the dump. Tired old windows are stacked against each other. A clunky file cabinet that probably hasn't held important papers in many years stands near a greening weathervane. Remnants of metal and glass glint in the sun.

For Hartley, the potential these pieces have to shine in objects created out of her imagination is great. When she squeezes around the objects to get to her basement, with thoughts of her latest piece rumbling around in her head, things sometimes grab her attention. In the case of the shutter chair, it was a garden edger, rusted to a deep earthy-brown from years of sitting outside. "See, people don't understand junk," she says. "If you store it, you don't see it. It needs to be there in the corner of your eye." She fastened the edger to the top of the chair's back. The piece now adorns the living room of a couple who bought it at the Brimfield Antique Fair.

For Hartley, who has a bachelor's degree in fine art from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, being an artist who works with "found objects" is a way of life. Wherever she is—walking through her East Falmouth neighborhood, visiting a friend's house, strolling the beach—Hartley is on the lookout for that special object that might complete a work-in-progress, or form the base of a new one.

"It's just innate," she says of knowing when she's found something valuable. "I think I trained myself, so it's just an automatic thing. . . . I love the idea of going to the beach and spending hours looking for stuff. It all comes from different places."

Hartley doesn't have to travel far, or look long, for the materials she needs to create what she calls "waxed fruit." She takes real apples and pears and then casts the fruit in cement. The

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fruit is arranged in a handmade cement bowl. The cement finish gives the pieces an imperfect, authentic shape and skin that Hartley colors and waxes with materials she prefers not to reveal, explaining that she doesn't want her unusual artistic method to be copied. Finished nails serve as the pears' stems, and old cut nails represent apple stems. The effect is unusual, yet somehow engaging. You want to feel the fruit's heft and trace its color variations.

In the past, when Hartley sold the fruit at the Wellfleet Flea Market or at the Brimfield Antique Fair, she enjoyed watching people sort through her fruit choices to create a bowl for their own dining room table. "They spent 20 minutes picking the fruit out. They made their own art—out of my art," she says with satisfaction.

Phyllis Hartley's work can be seen at phyllishartley@mac.com.

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Inventory, life size, cement bowls and fruit