

The Cardboard Cobbler



Folk singer Phranc surrounds herself with striking clothes and other fun stuff — all of which she's made from cardboard. **BY ANNIE BUCKLEY**

"I failed sewing three times," Phranc says, laughing. I am talking to the famed folk singer, next to a crowded worktable in her sunny art studio in Santa Monica, Calif., amid strikingly real cardboard renditions of sailor shirts, candy boxes, and a life vest.

That this quintessentially rebellious iconoclast has found the same wry sensibility in paper and paint that's a trademark of her albums — from the best known, *I Enjoy Being a Girl* (1989), to the most recent, *Milkman* (1998) — is something of a feat in itself, and doing it with spurned home-ec skills is somehow apropos. The self-proclaimed all-American Jewish lesbian folk singer punctures entrenched stereotypes with humor and humanity in her music, and her cardboard art is equally reflective, if quieter.

"I've been making stuff out of cardboard since I was a kid," Phranc says, recalling submarines and other "stuff you could crawl into." As a punk rocker in Los Angeles in the 80s, she sold her cardboard wares out of her apartment the day before rent was due. Since then, the work of The Cardboard Cobbler, Phranc's newest moniker, has come a long way. She has been included in several group exhibitions, and her first solo show opens at Cue Art Foundation in New York City in December.

Phranc has a deep respect for the everyday, innocuous little things that make our lives better, like an ice cream bar, a favorite pair of shoes, or the perfect shirt. Her art both celebrates and elevates these objects by preserving them in the simplest of media: paper and paint, cardboard and thread.

When working in paper, she first designs a pattern for her "fabric," sketched carefully in pencil. She eschews exactitude and prefers a handmade line to a ruler-straight one. Paper, Phranc explains,

is unforgiving. To give paper added flexibility, she layers it with acrylic or gesso before tracing and painting the pattern. When it's time to cut the pattern and sew, she says with a smile, "you close your eyes, you say a prayer, and you hope it doesn't tear."

Memory and family are intricately connected to Phranc's cardboard work. In 1991, while she was away on tour, her brother was killed. The tragedy prompted her to take time off from music and ensconce herself in her studio, where she focused on paper creations. Her first three-dimensional pieces, realistic replicas of pumps, penny loafers, and her trademark combat boots, inspire smiles and reflection. Phranc's work reinforces a universal connection between objects, memories, and the feelings that weave them together. In her studio, a cardboard KidKraft kitchen inspired in me a visceral memory of being a kid in the 70s.

When Phranc and Lisa, her partner of ten years, started a family, it was again important to her that she not be on the road so much. So she took the beautiful black and gold Singer Featherweight sewing machine she inherited from her grandmother to a friend's house and learned to sew.

Phranc still uses her Nana's machine to make her creations. Each sewn garment includes a hand-painted label adorned with a single palm tree or ocean wave. Her label, Phranc of California, is reminiscent of growing up in California. The garments are made to be exhibited, rather than worn. But as she completes each one, Phranc slips it on just once — the perfect test-run for artwork that celebrates the joy and fragility of the here and now.

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PAPER PACKED: The vibe in Phranc's studio is busy and relaxed at once. Though she's continually folding, cutting, or measuring, her infectious enthusiasm and welcoming smile (not to mention homemade cupcakes) perfectly complement the brightly painted paper creations that line the walls.