

## VISUAL ART

# For five decades, this Massachusetts maker quietly turned detritus into 'fully realized art'

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated September 16, 2020, 1:18 p.m.



Stephanie Cole has been making intricate shrines and stained glass pieces for 40 years, but she only started showing her work in 2017. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

ROCKPORT — “What is it about finding things that is so exciting?” asked assemblage artist Stephanie Cole as she wandered through the backyard of her 18th-century house.

She has found many things digging bits of history out of her soil and finding treasures behind walls. Cole once discovered a paper doll on a wooden beam behind a fireplace mantle, scraped it off with a razor, and framed and mounted it above the mantle.

The artist loves history. Throughout the house, which she and her husband, Jim, bought in 1971, she has placed hand-built little wooden boxes to hold tiny archeological finds.

“Stephanie Cole: Secular Cathedral,” at Fuller Craft Museum, glories in the resonance of such bits and bobs. They coalesce into works plump with meaning, humor, and emotion. Like “Grief Piece,” a wooden sarcophagus with nested felines, including one ornately garbed in beadwork. Making it helped her after the death of a beloved cat, Hazel.





Stephanie Cole's "Grief Piece," 1995-96. STEPHANIE COLE/COURTESY FULLER CRAFT MUSEUM

Self-portraits made each decade celebrate and reckon with her own progression through life. Cole referenced an X-ray to properly capture the curvature of her aging spine for “Self-Portrait Age 70” which features papier-mâché and needlepoint among other mediums.

The artist, who is 77, did not exhibit her assemblages until last year, at the Cape Ann Museum.

“Early in her life, she was almost afraid to get out in the art world and show her things,” said her husband.

“I didn’t want to,” Cole said. “I didn’t like a lot of what I saw. And in galleries, they get into your head about what people want to buy.”

But the idea of a museum — and perhaps the way museums honor the material culture Cole revels in — appealed to her. With the urging of her daughters, Irene and Paula Cole (the Grammy-winning singer-songwriter), she decided to share her work.





Stephanie Cole's "Self Portrait Age 70." STEPHANIE COLE/COURTESY FULLER CRAFT MUSEUM

She made a short video and sent it to select curators. Beth McLaughlin, the Fuller's artistic director and chief curator, saw it and made an appointment to meet Cole.

“She’s a rare artist that was just making for herself,” McLaughlin said. “there’s a real purity to her work because of that.”

McLaughlin offered Cole a show on the spot.

“She transforms detritus into fully realized art,” McLaughlin said. “Her talent with the formal elements of artmaking and her ability to select just the right item for her purpose is remarkable.”

Cole grew up in California. Her father, an artist who died when she was 13, took her on sketching expeditions. She went to art school and began painting with watercolors. It was young motherhood that drove her to build assemblages.

“We moved to Ithaca, where Jim was at Cornell getting his doctorate,” she said. “We lived in a trailer. I made a dollhouse out of junk. ... I had to make that to escape my situation,” she said. “I look back and see that making that dollhouse really saved me.”



One of Cole's first works was a dollhouse, now displayed in her studio. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

The dollhouse, filled with tiny handmade furniture (right down to the hinges in a secretary desk), is in the

studio at the end of her driveway. The wooden letters “SSH” hang on the studio’s front door. Inside,

Cole’s current project — a bereavement piece marking the loss of Belly, another cat — sits on a table in a workroom.

“Cake,” a five-layer assemblage, bright with a mosaic of broken ceramics and a bride and groom on top, stands in a corner. Each layer marks a decade of the Coles’ marriage. Single wedges of cake can be removed, revealing family snapshots.

“I like the feeling of discovery,” Cole said. “I want it to look beautiful, and then there’s more to see.”

The studio’s polished back room showcases her statues, shrines, and stained-glass windows. In the center stands “Mom,” for her mother. Like the Hindu goddess Kali, she has many arms, suggesting a mother’s many duties. Across her skirt, Cole has fixed typewriter keys.



Stephanie Cole made "Mom" in honor of her own mother. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

“She studied landscape architecture, and she was a secretary,” Cole said. “I bought an antique typewriter and spelled that out with the keys.”

The artist made “Mom” in 1995. “She was slowly dying of old age in California. My brother was out there,

and I could only fly out occasionally. I was working on this when she was bedridden,” Cole said.

The Fuller exhibition, like the one in Cole’s own studio, murmurs with her beliefs and the stories of her own family. Yet it feels archetypal, reverberant with passages we all go through, fashioned with materials steeped in history. You can almost hear the shards of the past humming and joining their voices in song.

She looked up at “Mom.”

“This is very personal,” she said. “It’s all personal.”

## **STEPHANIE COLE: SECULAR CATHEDRAL**

At Fuller Craft Museum, 455 Oak St., Brockton, through Jan. 10, 2021. 508-588-6000,

[www.fullercraft.org](http://www.fullercraft.org)

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