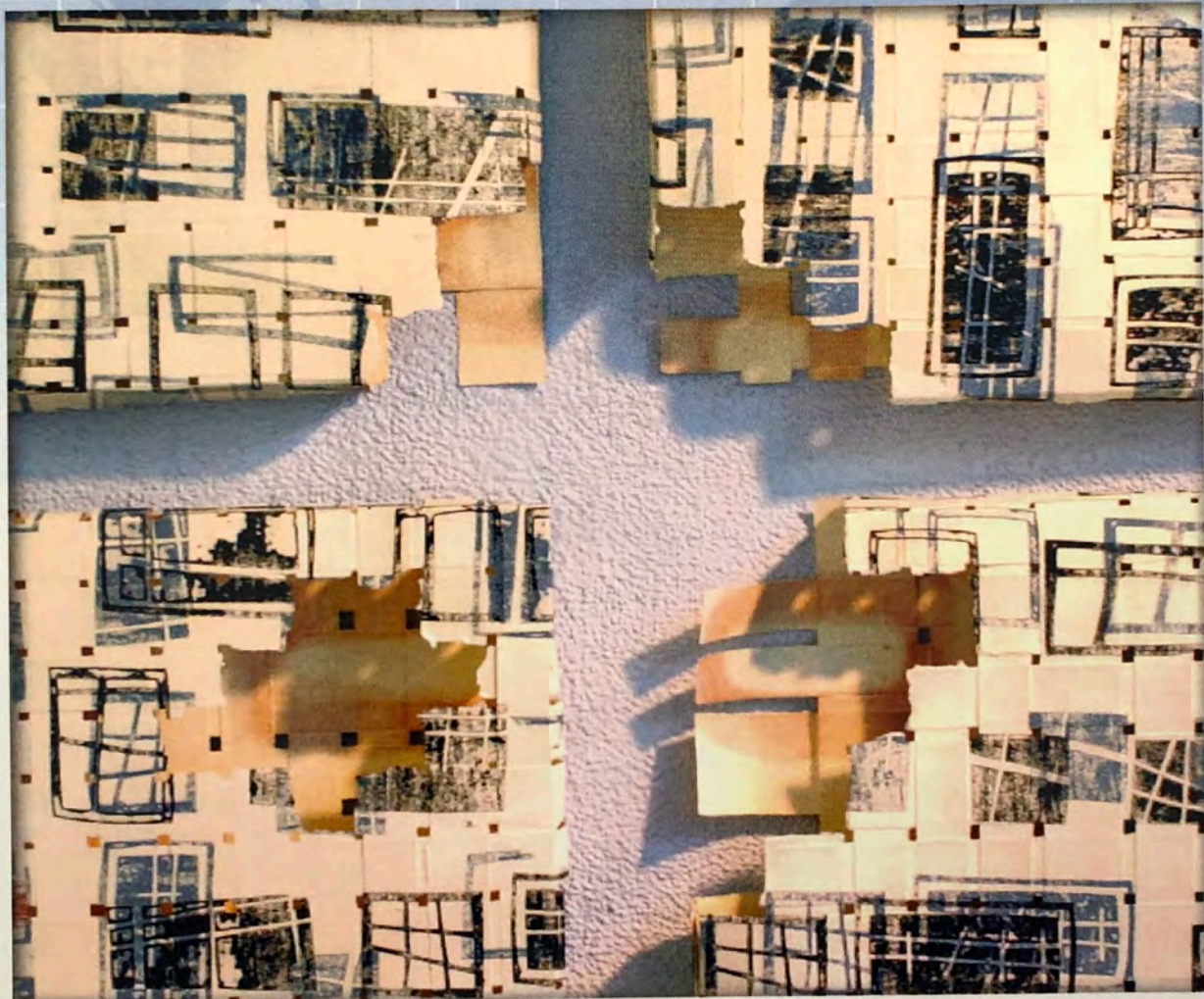


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## ABOUT THE COVER

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*Cover Art: Helen Cozza, Second Floor Window (Detail), 2006, 25" × 25" × 2", paper, four-color, four-plate intaglio on BFK paper. (Copyright permission by the artist)*

### Marked Difference: The Work of Helen Cozza

Laurel Lampela

**ABSTRACT.** Helen Cozza is a contemporary artist living in New Mexico who began working as a painter and moved into printmaking. Prevalent in her work is the use of the grid and the patterns created by weaving. The imagery is reminiscent of the environmental deterioration that Cozza observed in Buffalo and Cleveland where she lived for many years. Cozza knew at a young age that she was a lesbian and her work clearly speaks to her identity. Her work demands close inspection to see the marks of difference beneath the surface. doi:10.1300/J524v05n01\_02 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Art, Helen Cozza, difference, intaglio, lesbian, print-making, sculpture, weaving

Helen Cozza is a contemporary artist living in New Mexico. She was born, Helen Gannetti, the oldest of seven children in 1956 in Auburn, New York. Around the age of 35 she changed her name to Cozza, using the surname of her paternal grandmother who was also named Helen. Cozza recently earned an MFA in Studio Art-Printmaking from the University of New Mexico. She received her undergraduate degree in art education from the State University College at Buffalo, New York in 1978. Before moving to New Mexico, in 2001, she supported herself as an artist by teaching art at both private and public schools in Buffalo and Cleveland.

Cozza grew up in a working class family. Both of her parents never completed high school and struggled to raise their large family. While she was in high school, her parents divorced. Her mother became a chef in an Italian restaurant in order to provide for Helen and her six siblings.

As a child, Cozza disliked school but found refuge in art class. She remembers that entering the art room was like going into a magical world. She knew back then she wanted to be an artist since the art world was a place where she understood the rules-or absence of rules.

Cozza also knew at a young age that she was a lesbian. She had a crush on her best friend in middle school. When her mother saw them talking for hours in the pouring rain, she called them lesbians. Cozza had to look up the word in the dictionary to understand what her mother was saying. She knew her mother disapproved and, wanting to please her mother and be accepted, she tried to fit in by having boyfriends in high school. She was married to a man for four years but it wasn't until the marriage ended that she allowed herself, as an adult, to act on her romantic feelings for women. She met her partner of 15 years in Cleveland and they now make their home in New Mexico.

Living near Lake Erie and the industrial areas of Buffalo and Cleveland for much of her life has informed Cozza's work. Prevalent in her work is the use of the grid and the patterns created by weaving of thick and thin lines, similar to the structures of the abandoned and crumbling factories that Cozza observed in northern cityscapes. An early childhood memory of sunlight passing through the garden arbor in her grandfather's yard influenced her use of weaving. She was mesmerized by the patterns of shadows created when the light passed

IMAGE 1. Helen Cozza, *Insecure Blanket*, 2005, 84" × 36" × 1", Thai Kozo paper, Mylar, thread, shredded coconut shell. (Copyright permission by the artist)



between the slats of wood and, as an adult, works to recreate that moment in her work.

Cozza began working as a painter and moved into printmaking when she discovered she could more quickly achieve the effects she sought. The imagery in her prints is reminiscent of the environmental deteriora-

IMAGE 2. Helen Cozza, *corner resident*, 2005, 30" × 15" × 12", newspaper, masking tape, linen, wire, shredded coconut shell. (Copyright permission by the artist)



tion that occurs over time on various surfaces such as metal, which creates surprising and striking results.

While a graduate student, she investigated the possibilities of combining intaglio and lithographic printmaking using unorthodox papers such as velum and Mylar. Her fascination with using such materials led her to create several printed sculptures, including the methodical and repetitive process of weaving. *Insecure Blanket* consists of 12 paper weavings made of printed Mylar strips and Japanese paper joined together with shredded coconut shell to form the length of a human body. The crusty coconut shell represents a living form. The work takes on the appearance of a quilted blanket; yet one that provides little comfort or warmth. The blanket represents Cozza's childhood memories of growing up in a family incapable of expressing love.

Cozza became fascinated with the shredded coconut shell that led her to *corner resident*. She purposefully uses lower case spelling for the work, adding to its abject quality. The work, while unassuming, asserts a presence. The anthropomorphic sculpture made of newspaper, masking tape, linen, wire, and shredded coconut shell stands only 30 inches tall. *corner resident* appears soft but has a crusty and hard coating. Layers upon layers were built up to protect the soft armature of newspaper inside. The corner where the work must reside plays an important role. It provides support and added protection but also represents a space away from the larger room. There's a double message: don't come close but notice me. The corner represents a refuge and leaving the corner could present a risk. But then again is it expected that *corner resident* reside there? Perhaps the artist poses a question to the viewer. Is this a self-imposed or a mandated exile? Regardless, we are aware that we cannot help but notice *corner resident* and its unassuming nature.

In contrast, *Black Page* demands the viewer's attention. Cozza worked collaboratively at the Tamarind Institute with several Tamarind printers to create a series of editions, including *Black Page*. The "Manté Noir" lithographic print has a multitude of marks that Cozza created using a razor blade to scratch on the surface. The weave of intersecting lines becomes a collection of grids and patterns. The center section references her childhood memory of lying on the grass looking up at the sky beneath the arbor in her grandfather's backyard. The work reflects her view of the world framed yet impeded by the grid.

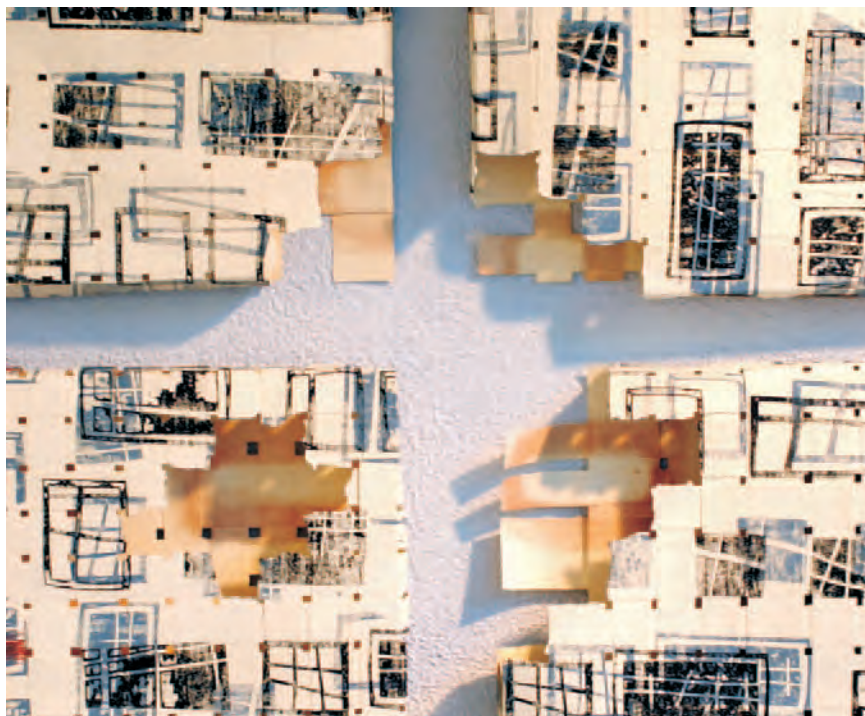
*Second Floor Window* is a wall sculpture consisting of four woven and printed, paper boxes. The woven boxes, with an inch border separating each, resemble a window. Abstracted window structures cover the surface of each box. At the point the four corners come together, the

IMAGE 3. Helen Cozza, *Black Page*, 2006, 32" × 32", Lithograph on Goyu paper. (Copyright permission by the artist)



paper boxes appear to be breaking down. Large areas of the woven boxes are missing and the soft glow of imagery created through various intaglio printmaking techniques is revealed. Cozza asks us why she would construct these boxes and only to have them begin to disintegrate. Disintegration allows the viewer to peer inside. We are invited to look closer and see the inner workings of the structure. Until we look inside we are unaware of the totality of the piece. The work can be a metaphor for understanding one another. There is much more to each of us than outer appearances convey. Perhaps if we take the time to look further we can learn so much more which can lead to greater understanding and acceptance.

IMAGE 4. Helen Cozza, *Second Floor Window*, 2006, 45" × 45" × 2", four-color, four-plate intaglio on BFK paper. (Copyright permission by the artist)



*Again . . . Again* is an installation of 12 separate prints, which are individually framed. Each of the four-color intaglio prints was created using four copper plates printed on top of each other, creating abstract images reminiscent of a weaving. Weaving is a meticulous process that demands persistence. The tighter the weave the stronger it is. Cozza sees the weaving of images as a metaphor for memory. Some printed images, like memories, can appear worn down and faded; others appear closer to the surface and stronger. She sees the work as a visual whisper of who she is. The work depicts a language and a sensibility that Cozza has developed and speaks to her identity. It is no coincidence that each of the 12 prints are on Thai Kozo paper; a fragile paper with a luminous, translucent quality. The paper can be torn and easily destroyed but the frames protect and serve as a buffer. Each of



the 12 prints is similar and can appear redundant. Yet, the artist reiterates a similar theme as seen in *corner resident*—a whispered refrain that insists on being heard.

In a personal communication with me, Cozza explained:

We selectively collect our memories. Some are buried beneath an intricate woven web so as to prevent their resurfacing. Others are new and close to the surface. But eventually all memories are filtered through a tightly woven fabric of our own creation.

IMAGE 5. Helen Cozza, *Again . . . Again* (Detail), 2006, 41" × 125", four-color, four-plate intaglio on Thai Kozo paper. (Copyright permission by the artist)



Cozza's work clearly speaks to her identity as a lesbian. Growing up in a working class family that demanded she fit in left her wanting to express her difference. That her work is abstract is her message. The imagery is not overtly apparent or easily read. She confronts the viewer with objects that demand closer inspection. She encourages us to take the time to look deeper, to see what's beneath the surface, to see the marks of difference.