

# Cornwall on a Small Scale



Above left, Ilisha Helfman at home in West Cornwall with a miniature dollhouse. Top right, interior views. Above right, a miniature Pearly Queen dress and Navajo-type shirt.

Written by KATHRYN BOUGHTON

Photographed by LAURIE GABOARDI

For Ilisha Helfman of West Cornwall, the delight is in the detail. The extent to which she will go to create that detail is evident in virtually everything the former textile designer makes, whether it is minuscule buttons and buckles, tightly folded ephemera incorporated into collage art or "Emily's Dollhouse," a pop-up cardboard building that is her latest collaboration with her book and Web designer husband, Joe Freedman.

Miniatures have been fascinating to the artist since her childhood in St. Louis, Mo. The daughter of Sheldon Helfman, a "brilliant and wonderful" realist watercolor painter, and Muriel Nezhnie, a tapestry designer and weaver, she was encouraged from the start to express her creativity.

"Everyone in the family had a workspace when I grew up," she recalled. "My brother had a ceramics studio in the garage, and I was designing textiles by the time I was 6. My mother taught me how to cut up rubber erasers to make them into stamps. I made hundreds of patterns on tissue paper, covering both sides of the paper. I had my first textile agent when I was 12."

Simultaneously, she developed her passion for miniatures. The top of a secretary desk in the family home was pressed into duty as a dollhouse. "I used the top section, behind the glass doors, for my dollhouse—each shelf was a different floor," she explained. "I used to enjoy using things that had other uses in real life as furnishings for the dollhouse. The top of a saltshaker became a colander and I made utensils out of wire. A chess pawn became the base for a lamp and I made a Tiffany lampshade for it. I was very inspired by old houses and I wanted to replicate them."

She was encouraged in these endeavors by her equally creative parents. "My mother would find old things for me in tag sales," Ms. Helfman recounted. "Once, in Europe, she found some scraps of metal she thought I should have. I said, 'What will I do with that?' She said, 'I don't know, but you'll use them for something.'"

Ms. Helfman continued making patterns throughout her high school years and then went on to Smith College in Northampton, Mass. She did graduate work in graphic design at the Yale University School of Design, and then followed school with some corporate work before moving to New York and becoming a collage artist. Her exquisite collages, many done on a compact scale, were crafted from ephemera.

"I used throw-away paper, things that are touched daily by everyone—items that mean the same thing to everyone who uses them. I used shredded federal currency—there are hundreds of bits of money included in them—candy wrappers, the insides of envelopes, the tear-off edges from printer paper, food labels ... I thought about all the time that slips away doing things that we hardly even think about. These works commemorate all the time we spend doing everyday things, rather than just throwing away all those hours."

One of her collage works replicates a log cabin pattern used in quilt design. A series of subtly colored and meticulously folded octagons of paper are grouped to create the effect of a quilt, another household

object once crafted from everyday materials.

Another diminutive piece, more vivid in its use of color, interprets the works of Monet.

The workmanship in Ms. Helfman's creations is fine and exacting, and often executed on a scale so small it is almost unimaginable. "I have always gravitated to small things," she acknowledged. "It is a theme that runs through my work."

When she discovered the use of digital art and cutting lasers, it became possible for her to miniaturize her work even further. "That opened up a whole new world for me," she said. "When I was 12 or 13, I started making miniatures for dollhouses. As I got older, I put that away. Thirty years later, I decided I could enjoy all that again."

Employing her penchant for fine detail and her continuing interest in miniatures, she is now marketing through several annual shows to the "subculture" that collects miniatures. Ms. Helfman creates items ranging from beautifully colored handcrafted fabric rugs to teeny wooden buttons—six were once stitched to a card that measures only a quarter of an inch across. These creations start at \$8 for a few buttons and range up into the hundreds of dollars.

Particularly intriguing to the artist are the buttons and buckles she designs on a computer, which are then cut with a laser. They simulate full-size buttons made from a variety of materials. "There are a lot of stages—designing, cutting ... I use many different woods to suggest many materials. The abalone come out in different colors and I spend a lot of time sorting them," she said.

Some of the minuscule buttons are sold loose in little packets, and are purchased by doll enthusiasts from around the world for use on miniature clothing. "People e-mail me and I try to help them choose the buttons that are right for them," she said. "They will say, 'How small are they? Like the buttons on my shirt?' and I say, 'You're not getting it. We're talking the head of a pin.'"

Others collect her buttons on cards. "There are people who collect buttons," Ms. Helfman said. "They will arrange them on cards, frame them and hang them on the walls. I have made little display cards for my buttons, too. Sometimes I copy old advertising to use on the cards and incorporate the buttons into the design."

She pointed to one petite card that depicted people playing tennis. A series of buttons, graduated in size, traced the trajectory of the "ball" as it neared the closest figure. In one saucy card, buttons formed a bikini on a tiny female figure, while on a third they became the wheels of roller skates. Other cards are more matter of fact, and simply display rows of buttons in different shapes and finishes.

Some buttons are glued to the cards, but all are designed to be sewn on. She uses fine imported beading needles to attach them to the cards or to clothing. She pulled two little garment collages from her bag to show how the buttons can be used on doll clothing.

"This is a Pearly Queen dress," she said, proffering it on the palm of her hand. The dress, encrusted with her little buttons, replicates garments worn by Cockneys in England. (Street merchants in 19th-century London admired style and panache and imitated the wealthy West End society's fashion of wearing pearls. The street vendors took it a step further, sewing lines of pearl "flashies" on their battered hand-me-down waistcoats, caps and working trousers.)

The second garment collage adorned by Ms. Helfman suggests a Navajo shirt.

She said that working digitally has allowed her to design in a larger format and then miniaturize the final product. She also uses the

computer when working with architects and other artists to create mock-ups of buildings and art installations. "I can work with a sculptor, for instance, to digitally install works of art into a building so they can see what it will look like. Or I can work with people on landscaping. I once helped some people who wanted to clear some land. I showed them what it would look like [if they cleared it in] six different ways. It helps keep people from making mistakes."

Ms. Helfman and her family have been living in Cornwall for eight years. As with so many others who have come here, they visited friends and fell in love with the area. Since coming, they have been active in the community—she has designed posters for many area events. Mr. Freedman designed the book, "Cornwall in Pictures." While creating the book, he also established a digital archive for the community of some 600 historic pictures.

Last year, they launched their latest endeavor, pop-up structures the first of which is "Emily's Dollhouse," a tiny engineering miracle created by Mr. Freedman and decorated in rich textile prints by his wife.

Emily's Dollhouse folds flat for storage, but unfolds in seconds to become a three-dimensional dollhouse. Measuring 11 inches by 11 3/4 inches by 7 inches, the building has an upstairs and downstairs, and there are 33 different pieces of "furniture" that can be installed in it. The accessories are sold in three sets—the parlor, the formal garden and the sewing room.

The accessories, also crafted of heavy papers, are easily assembled, and, as with all that Ms. Helfman does, are remarkably detailed. A tiny stove has a door that opens to reveal two grills within. A small sewing machine evokes the Victorian era, while a pedestal table comes complete with a vase of flowers in its center. A baby grand piano completes the parlor's décor.

"I didn't want to limit the imagination to the inside of the house," said Ms. Helfman, "so we designed two gardens that were inspired by visits to beautiful gardens in the region. The gardens are furnished with appropriate furniture and one has a pool with a frothing fountain at its center."

Ms. Helfman has covered all the household surfaces with textile designs. "Joe handed me a white house," she said, "and it was just too tempting. I love pattern so much, I covered every surface—and it worked. The furniture is also covered with designs. At first we wondered whether the furniture would show against all the patterns in the house, but it was fine. I like the way the light plays off the surfaces."

The house design is based on the classic New England home, but the multiple patterns lift it out of any specific genre. "I didn't want it to be specific to any particular house," she said. "Some people say it looks Victorian, others say the textile patterns make it look Indian."

The couple creates the house sets in their own workshops and markets them online at her Web site, hestiahouse.com (named for the Greek goddess of the hearth) and through local stores such as Lyme Regis in Kent and Wish House in Cornwall.

They have made about 2,000 to date and are now working on a new item, a pop-up service station. Again there will be a local touch—Ms. Helfman has photographed the work areas at Hall's Garage in Cornwall and Bantam Cigo. She has miniaturized the images, incorporating them into the interior design of the service bays. "Who wouldn't love a miniature that shows every kind of fan belt hanging on the wall?" she asked.