

# Recollection of Things Past

*Nature Morte*, the title of a recent exhibition that included nine photogravures by School of Visual Arts Director Lynne Allen, is the French term for still life. But the literal translation is more grim: "dead nature." For Allen, the two connotations are equally apt. Her photogravures of objects that have lost their original purpose and significance offer a study in obsolescence; both her subjects and her method are remnants of a bygone time.

Several of those images form a link to and reflection on her Native American heritage. Allen can trace her Sioux ancestors back six generations. But it was only in the last decade that she began exploring this background in her art. "I'm the product of assimilation into white society," she says. "Beginning with my great-great-grandmother, all the women married white men. I didn't live the reservation life. I grew up an hour outside Philadelphia. I've always been very aware and proud of my rich history, but I see myself as a white person. I didn't think I should go around talking about myself as a Native American. I only started making work about that history after a Navajo friend of mine said, 'Lynne, come out of the closet.'"

Allen's art has always dealt with psychological and social issues: the homeless, Alzheimer's patients, prisoners. "The common denominator in my work is the underdog," she says. "And I didn't realize until I was 50 that my passion, my empathy, comes from my mother and the women before her."

Her *Nature Morte* show marked the first time Allen created photogravures, using an

exacting printmaking technique in which a photo is etched onto a copper plate. "The technique was invented in the 1830s, which is about the time they started herding Native Americans," she says. "By 1860, Native Americans were no longer roaming the plains, but were living on reservations. So I used a medium from that period when these people were no longer valid, to create images of things that are no longer valid today."

For instance, she juxtaposed moccasins and shoe forms. "Moccasins are still being



Lynne Allen

and 20-year-olds don't think about themselves as subjects. We have discussions about what they have read or are reading. I have a colleague from the College of Arts

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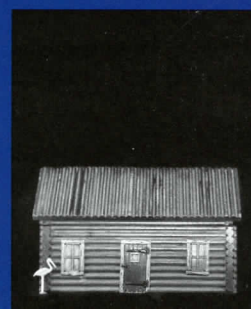
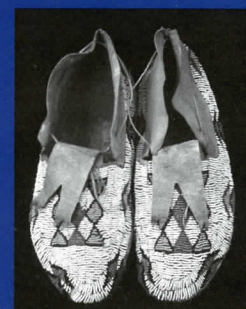
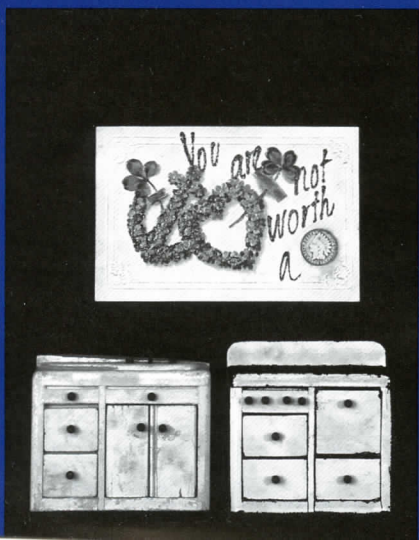
made, but Native Americans don't wear them anymore, except for ceremony," she says. "And shoes are no longer made with shoe forms. I put these pictures next to each other because they represent two sides of me. And they're objects that no longer carry their utilitarian purpose. They're artifacts." A photo of a log cabin with a flamingo in front of it is about progress and change. "We've come from the log cabin to people having flamingos in their front yard. But to what extent does that change impinge on other people's culture?"

The photogravures challenge people to find their own interpretations. "I tell my students that good art is like a good movie," says Allen. "When you go to a good movie, you think about it for a week. You want a piece of art to do that too."

She teaches one class each semester, an artisanal bookmaking class that requires students to produce text as well as images. It is, she says, a course about ideas. "I try to get them to delve inside themselves to find out who they are so that they can make work that is meaningful to them. Most 19-

& Sciences Writing Program come in to do projects with my students about how to write and how to put stories together. I want them to understand that throughout history, artists' work has been about themselves and the world they live in, and their reaction to that world. The most important thing to me is getting students to think."

Allen says that her own work, regardless of the subject, has always been meant "to educate the public about certain issues. Empathy is the power to imagine a world outside your own experience, and although the truth is not always pretty, the hunger for it is." She is currently making a series of small books, only 2 inches by 2 inches, "rewriting the history" of how the West was won. "I want people to understand that the history they learned in school is not the entire history. History is always written by the victor. I want my work to be good, but I also want people to delve deeper into the 'why' of what I'm making. I've never done anything for money. I've never done anything for fame. I've just done it because I had to satisfy myself." **R**



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