

UP FRONT



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

Jennifer Rempel, Artist

In Jennifer Rempel's studio, photos of her work affirm that she is a decorative artist, someone who creates art that has a functional use. Jennifer, a graduate of Carnegie Mellon with a B.A. in Fine Arts, has been doing commissions for corporations and private clients for 40 years. Her artist's statement makes clear that her work is not going to be rosebuds and ivy: "I am dedicated to both preservation and creation.... As I strive to create museum-quality decorative painting, my ultimate goal is to reveal the power of art in the context of every day."

In one of her large commissions, an office building to be decorated top to bottom, Jennifer riffed on an artist who crossed the line between decorative and fine art all the time, Andy Warhol. Jennifer created Warhol's ladies shoe designs, and sent them dancing down the hall, leading the way to the ladies' loo.

Rempel along with artists Robert Qualters and Jimmy Wilson, a craftsman who makes guitars from a piece of cured wood, all have a studio space in a century-old former school building in Homestead, overlooking the Monongahela River.

When a husband and wife asked her to decorate their newly acquired downtown penthouse walls, floor to ceiling and some rooms including the ceiling, Jennifer went



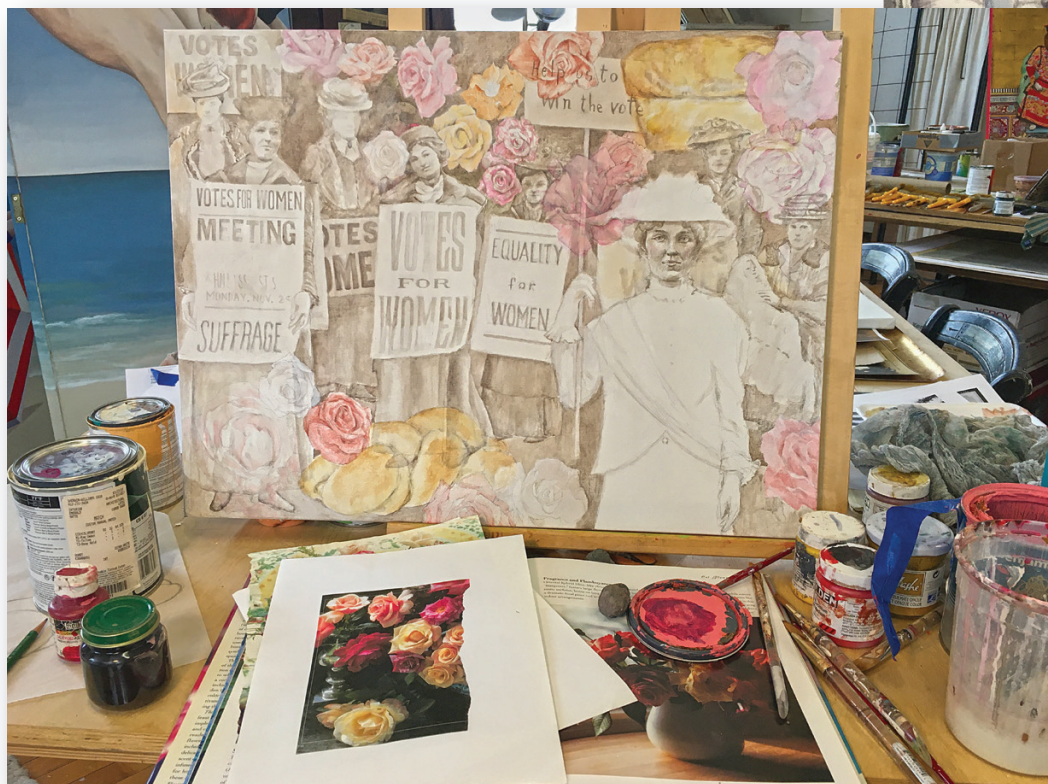
Self-Portrait with Pysanky, latex and acrylic paint.

All photos courtesy of Jennifer Rempel.

Mother Jones, latex and acrylic paint and pencil.



Betty Mabry Davis, latex and acrylic paint.



Work in progress: Jennifer's grandmother, a suffragette, latex and acrylic paint and pencil.

Rachel Carson, latex and acrylic paint.



in a new direction. She suggested a folding screen be used to break up some open space, a decorative screen, of course. The clients, very fond of Pittsburgh's history, suggested that the artwork on the screen depict the Battle of Homestead in 1892, which led Jennifer to the library in Homestead, and to the Pumphaouse, the only remaining structure from the events of 1892.

She chose to enlarge an existing etching of the battle, stretching it out, and add color and some political cartoons—one depicting the shooting of Frick, one being the logo of the Pinkertons with an open eye and the words "We Never Sleep."

In the same penthouse, Jennifer painted a scene from the client's favorite childhood story by Oscar Wilde on the ceiling in the master bedroom. The decorative art is eclectic, reflecting the owners' favorite things, one being the Steelers. The powder room is dedicated to the players, their names inscribed in gold ink calligraphy on the walls.

Through her research on the steelworkers' lockout by Frick, Jennifer became acquainted with the members of the Battle of Homestead, and through them, learned about Fannie Sellins, who was murdered during a rally for striking coal miners in Arnold, along the Allegheny River. A grim photo of Fannie from the coroner's report, showing her bruised and bloodied face, hung in every union hall in the area. Jennifer used a vintage photo of Fannie in jail to create a sympathetic painting of the event (featured on the back cover of the last issue of this magazine). She also painted Mother Jones, not in her gloomy black clothing but rather light blue, reminding us that she was a woman as well as an organizer.

Another significant woman, Betty Davis, came to her attention more recently, through a film being made about her life—though not the Bette Davis of Hollywood fame. This Betty was married at one time to jazz musician and composer Miles Davis, and is a composer herself, still living in Homestead. Jennifer has

made a vibrant and alluring portrait of this still-beautiful woman.

Near the front door of her studio, giving it priority, is an unfinished canvas. One face is complete, a full face with a soft pink complexion, part of a group of marching women. "That's my Polish grandmother," Jennifer told me. "She was an immigrant and became a U.S. citizen." The painting will commemorate the 100th anniversary of American women getting the vote in 1920.

So I come back to her intent to reveal the power of art in the context of today. "Here I am, finding all these accomplished women of whom I'd never heard and surely there are more women who made local history. I've worked for Pittsburgh corporations and individuals; maybe my work, including these women, is a story, reflective of Pittsburgh art in the past 40 years. My version, Jennifer Rempel's version," she said with a grin. ☀

Bette McDevitt is a freelance writer and a longtime contributor to *Western Pennsylvania History*.