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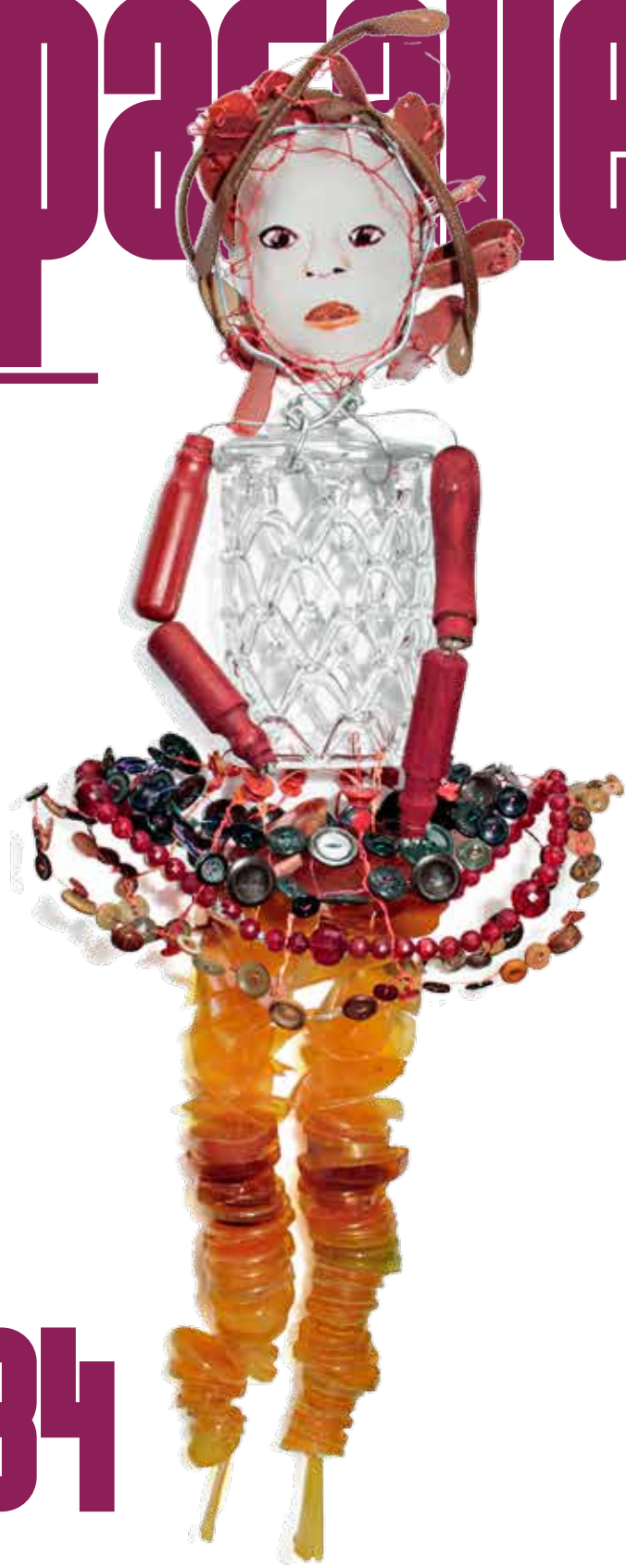

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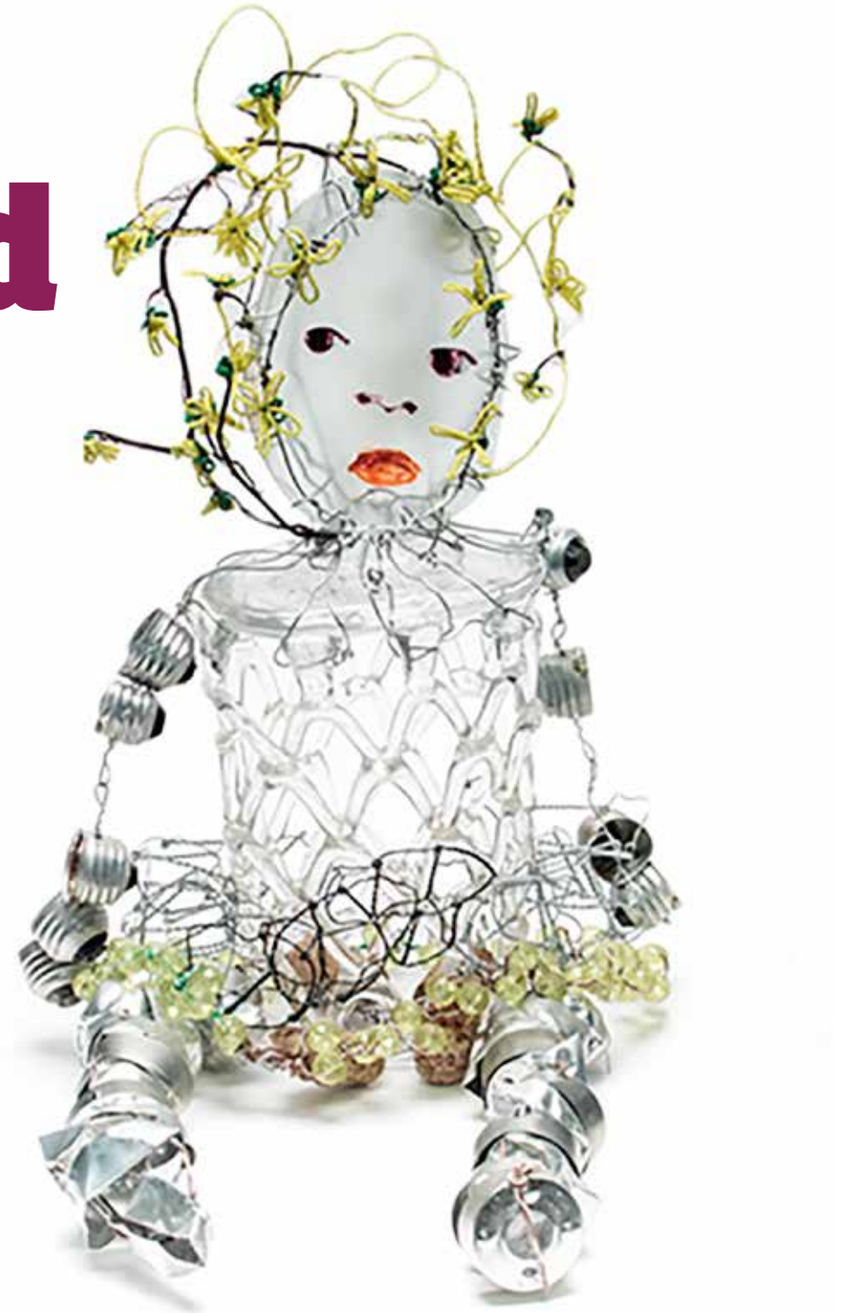
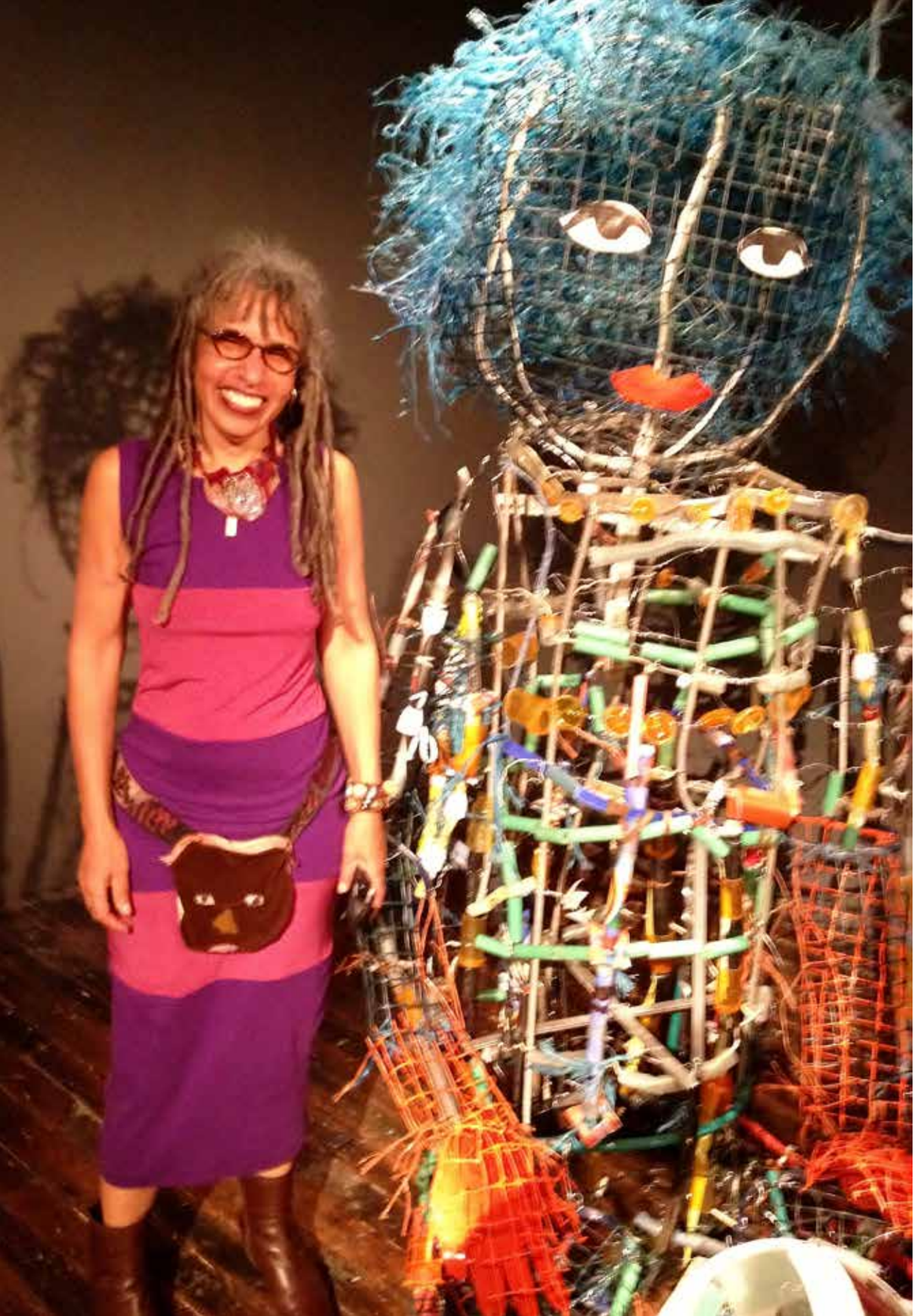
People are not trash and should not be treated as such.





MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE ART OF MARITA DINGUS

BY STACY LAWSON

In 1988 I purchased a necklace from my friend Jacqui's boutique, Jordan, on Fifth and Pine Street in downtown Seattle. It was one of the few things in the shop that I could afford. Fifty dollars was a good part of my weekly budget then. I fell for this homely piece – a loose-limbed female figure made of wire, beads, and scrap fabric with skinny plexi-glass arms and legs that dangled from its body. The pendant hung on a chain of leather cord and odd-metal links. I loved the way it moved as I walked, clacking softly like a small wind chime. I loved its expression of surprise drawn in ballpoint. Unfortunately, I lost it before I understood that it was more than just a quirky necklace made of junk. It was a Marita Dingus original. It was the start of my love affair with an artist, her work, her process, her philosophy, and her drive to speak about difficult subjects in a medium other than words.

Now, 25 years later, Dingus – a thin youthful woman turning 60 with coca-colored skin, a warm smile, and an array of graying dreds – is a well-respected assemblage artist. Since childhood she has made art from found objects. She is a dumpster diver, an environmental steward, a human-rights activist, and a librarian of human waste. In her own words, "I use things that people no longer see value in." Stuff most of us would call trash. A wad of soiled electrical tape becomes a black rose when straightened and curled around itself. An empty plastic spool from thread becomes the torso for a doll. Dingus has a sensitivity to wastefulness that is common for those who survived the Great Depression, which she didn't but her parents did.

Much of Dingus's work is an exploration of dark chapters of history and the power differential in human relationships – slavery, racism, sexism, religious fundamentalism. Her work is not to shame us but to wake us up. She wants us to do better. "People," she says, "are not garbage and should not be treated as such." The themes of discarded people and profligate habits are the text and subtext in all of her art.

Dingus's work is distinctive. Many of her pieces glitter ironically. A string of metal bottle caps frames a black Frida Kahlo-like face. Lace foil from an air filter is a skirt for a doll. She's a genius in the way that she puts humble material to use in works of eerie beauty that are fanciful, intricate, and ornate. At the Traver Gallery in downtown Seattle, *Cork Face*–a mottled face the size of a wall clock–was hung looking out but not really looking at anything. Up close, *Cork Face*'s composition distills to its parts. Over 200 stained corks laid-on-end in rough concentric circles (think, assemblage pointillism) are bound in a scratched metal flashing. *Cork Face's* expression is blank. Her right eye is smaller than her left and looks like it might slip from her face. Her smudged lips, the color of smeared blood, are pursed. Loose strings hang randomly. Her hair is made from drab-green wire bent into leaves. She is hurt. What first appears whimsical dissolves into sadness.

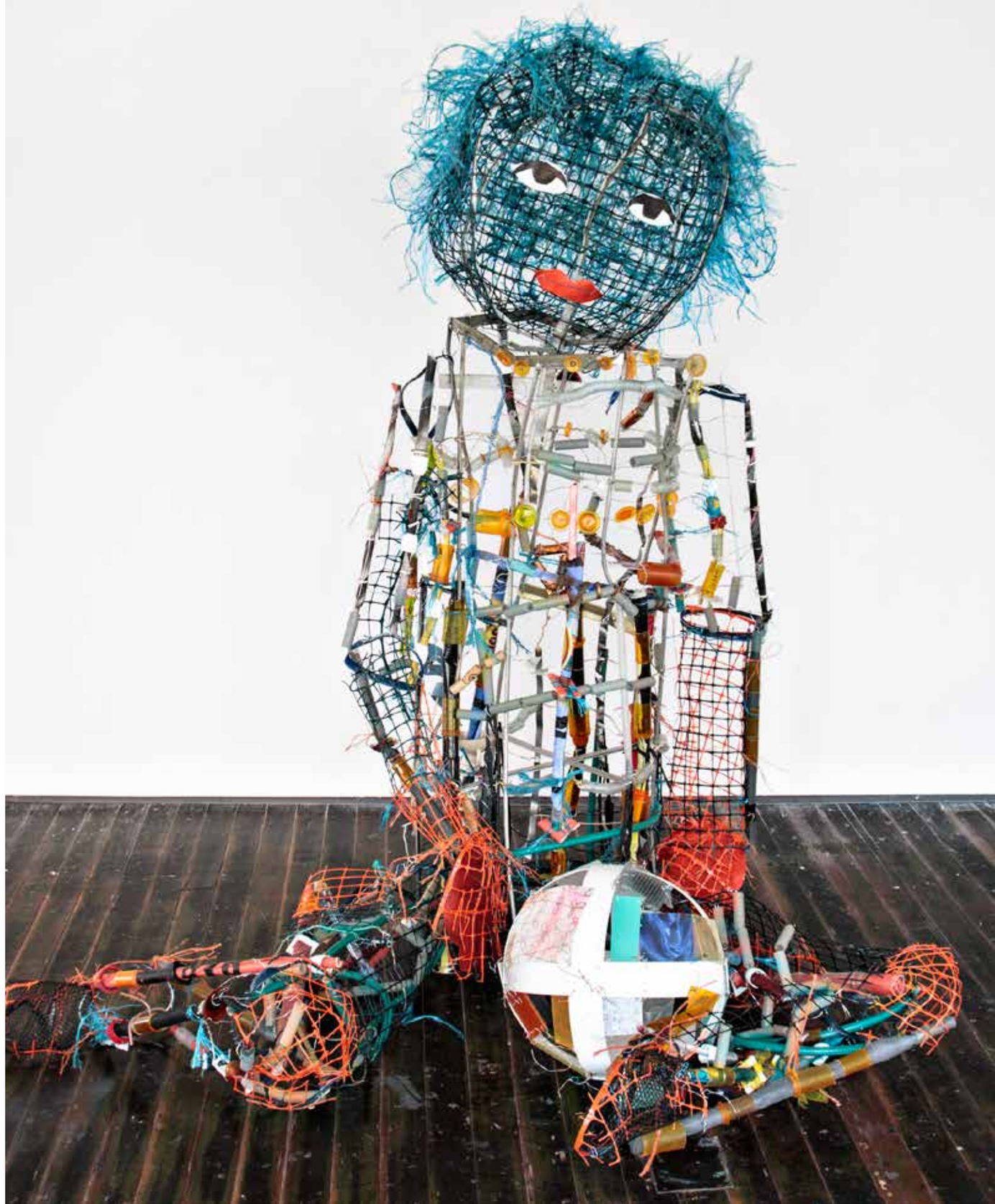
It's not uncommon to hear someone viewing Dingus's work say, *This is not art. A child could make it*. But it's also common for people to fall quiet as they enter her layered world where 200 discarded corks can show us a range of skin tones and and that beauty does not have a single appearance.

Dingus's art career began at home under the tutelage of her parents. She began to draw at age three on the backside of paper that her father recycled from the trash at the Boeing Company where he was an engineer. I'm guessing that today this could be a security breach or possibly a firing offense in this paranoid post 9/11 world.

When Dingus was a kid, her dad gave her piles of odds-and-ends to work with. An artist himself, he once chopped a car in half and attached the front of it to a truck-bed and drove it around. Her father made art from what was on hand, working with non-traditional materials and forms.
For Dingus, like her dad, there is no box and never was. Her imagination opens outwards discovering new possibilities as she goes.

Dingus's mother, from what I can tell, was the practical parent–a devout Catholic and a seamstress who made the family clothes on a Singer sewing machine.

IMAGES OF MARITA DINGUS'S ART BY BEN LERMAN COURTESY WILLIAM TRAVER GALLERY



She taught her daughter to sew and by fifth grade Dingus was making her own clothes. Dingus still makes her own clothes on one of half a dozen vintage Singer sewing machines that she bought used (of course). Her clothes are bright-happy patchwork tops, leggings, skirts, shorts, and small zippered waist bags with a somber or surprised face staring at nothing in particular. Dingus reminds me of a toddler, exuberant in her choice of colors–plum, fuschia, crimson, turquoise, gold, pea green, blueberry. She'll throw down stripes, plaids, polka-dots, chintz, and florals in a single outfit. At show openings, she is a burst of color against the backdrop of her work and her patrons who dress in toady shades of black, brown, and gray, Seattle style.

Most of Dingus's work features sewing by hand or machine for structure and/or for embellishment. I have a fabric bangle of hers that I bought 15 years ago. It's made of layers of fabric sewn together with tracks of stitches that go around and over and under and crisscross until the stitches and fabrics are one piece.

IMAGES OF MARITA DINGUS BY DIANE KURZYNA AKA RUBY RE-USABLE

Dingus takes cast-offs in her nimble over-sized hands and reshapes them into big and small, exquisite, layered sculptures of women, girls, men, babies, boxes, quilts, flowers, fences, wall hangings, jewelry, masks, protective hands, shackles, and/or whatever else she conjures. She is the ultimate recycler, rarely if ever buying her materials beyond glue sticks. She has her favorite materials like fancy gold cat-food tins that a friend saves for her but she's not picky–raffia, milk cartons, electrical cord, keys, bottle caps, rubber bands, fence posts, plastic bits, metal finials, wooden spindles, chain, glass shards, tin cans, caution tape, twist ties, Christmas bulbs, bungee cord, worn jeans, rusted nails, vintage thread, faded ribbon, leftover yarn, chicken wire, window frames, tin foil, broken toys. As the nature of our garbage changes she adapts. Telephone wire once abundant, now scarce, is replaced with another wire, likely from computer waste.

In a class that I took with her recently at the Frye Art Museum, *Sculptures: Figures, Mojo Hands, and Baskets,* I saw Dingus begin a mask using disposable rubber flip-flops from a mani/pedi salon. While her work appears to be haphazard it's not. Dingus's sense of scale and proportion for her human figures comes from classical drawing techniques, the approach that Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci used.

By the nature of her work some people think Dingus is a folk artist or an outsider artist, or a self-taught artist. And her work is not dissimilar to many self-taught artists, particularly self-taught African-American artists, in techniques, themes, and use of *found objects*–James Hampton, Bessie Harvey, Thornton Dial, Gertrude Morgan, Mary T Smith, Nellie Mae Rowe, Lucy Pettway, Noah Purifoy, to name a few. Like Dingus, they were/are painters, sculptors, basket weavers, and utensil and ritual-item makers. Like Dingus they drew inspiration from their African-American heritage, life in the south, Jim Crow, poverty, discrimination, menial labor, and the distant African heritage that they carry in their DNA.

But Dingus unlike the others was not raised in poverty, was not born in the South, was not denied an education, was not discouraged from making art, and was more of a witness to the most hideous forms of discrimination than a victim.

Dingus was raised in Auburn, Washington, a small (and then) white town outside of Seattle. She felt out-of-place in the pale world of her childhood. She was left out of play. She was seldom chosen to be on teams. All of these experiences led her to explore her African roots, the history of slavery, racism, sexism, and institutionalized discrimination of all kinds. And, Dingus was in high school during the late sixties when the Black Power Movement emerged.

She went to Catholic school with nuns who appreciated her art and encouraged her to draw. She was awarded a BFA at Temple University in 1980 and an MFA in 1985 at San Jose State University. Dingus has been awarded prestigious prizes–a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Morrie and Joan Alhadeff Poncho Artist of the Year, two Pilchuk Glass Studio residencies, a Tacoma Museum of Glass Residency, among others. She has shown her work regularly in galleries and museums at home and abroad. In addition to her sculptures being shown, her home, yard, and furnishings have been featured as well. Even her chicken coop has been an object of interest.

Unlike many folk artists Dingus has been recognized in her lifetime and her work is increasing in value. Versions of the pendant that I bought in 1988 now sell for $500–ten times as much. I think of her pieces as time capsules of waste, as labors of love, as pieces of art with the power to transform the material, the artist, and the viewer. Dingus has made us more sensitive to our history and habits through the narrative that runs through her art.

Dingus is a productive artist. Her extensive body of work is a documentary of time, place, class, history, and race. Besides being a good artist Dingus is an educator. Her art has cracked open my head and my heart to issues of democracy, race, education, equity, and economics. It has encouraged me to learn more about slavery and to name it and to own it and to acknowledge that African Americans have suffered disproportionately not only from slavery but from the aftermath of slavery that continues today.

Dingus's 63-foot horizontal Buddha, *Buddha as an African Enslaved*, made of twisted rags, chains of navy polyester, and black and white cloth wrapped around wire was inspired by a 60-foot Buddha near Tiananmen Square in Bejing. In a moment of awe Dingus committed to make her own Buddha which took her a year to complete. As she carried it into the Francine Seders Gallery for its first installation she discovered that it was too tall to show upright indoors.

In an epiphanic moment she saw the horizontal Buddha as the hold of a slave ship jammed full of Africans laid-in like cargo traveling the Middle Passage. I spent hours after seeing the piece at the Northwest African American Museum looking over pictures of slave ships online and reading about the finances of the slave trade. Slaves, shipped from Africa to the Americas, were exchanged for raw materials of the new world, and the raw materials were then shipped to Europe to be manufactured into goods that would be shipped to Africa and traded for slaves captured by African slave catchers in the interior of the country. A hideous trinity of slave trading.

Dingus's mother not only sent her daughter to Catholic school she took her to Sunday Mass weekly. But Dingus was not moved by the doctrine and liturgy and spent the hours in church daydreaming about the saints that ringed the sanctuary. From what I can tell Dingus is not religious in the way that her mother was. Yet she is a spiritual person and her gods and goddesses are not limited to a particular religion. Her practice of transforming waste into art is a spiritual practice. It's not unlike meditation or yoga. It's not unlike the work of a painter who uses pigment and brushes to reveal a vision on a blank canvas.

Her practice of transforming waste into art is a spiritual practice. It's not unlike meditation or yoga.

While Dingus may not count the rosary her larger works require endless rounds of disciplined repetition. For *200 Women of African Descent and 400 Men of African Descent* Dingus made 600 small faceless fabric dolls to memorialize the West African slave trade head-quartered in the Elmina Castle in Ghana (the largest trading post ever for African slaves). For many artists this scale of production might kill a project but one gets the sense that for Dingus it is a crucial aspect, a remembrance meditation.

I dropped by the Francine Seders gallery in north Seattle in 2009 for an opening of new works by Dingus. I entered a room filled with dark-mysterious garlands that spiraled from the ceiling, some landing in small heaps on the floor and others grazing the floor or hanging several feet above it. They twisted and swayed gently as patrons brushed them or stirred the air in the room. Their movement was not unlike the way seaweed sways as a swimmer passes but their intent was malignant. Made of rubber, rope, empty film canisters, etc, the garlands represented the shackles used to chain slaves to be transported like animals.

Dingus's work draws us in by its childlike qualities but a closer look reveals a murkier side of humanity. What can repair the damage from the sins of the past? What can restore dignity to a people who were bought and sold as a commodity?

There is a piece of Dingus's work that scares me and leaves me in tears. *The Nigerian Girls,* a group of 200 figures made from rubber, metal, and thread is a reminder of the 200 or 300 girls abducted by Islamic fundamentalist group Boko Haram in Nigeria in 2014. The small figures are dull black. They appear to have been rescued from a fire but not before being burned. They are scattered on a platform with nothing underneath them, nothing in their hands, nothing holding them together, nothing protecting them. They have expressions of fear and horror and exhaustion. I believe Dingus is telling us that it is not only the past we have to remember but the present we have to guard. As a Delegate to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Bejing in 1995 Dingus knows that women are always at risk. Nineteen years later this is still true. In a talk that I recently heard by Gloria Steinem, Steinem said that if you want to know about the relative safety and peacefulness of a country look at how women are treated. Places that tolerate or condone violence against women are inherently violent.

This year my father was sick for three months before he died of a host of ailments and old age. My mother, my three sisters, and I held a three-month sit-in by his hospital bed as he was making the decision to let go of his life. I took a break from the hospital one day and walked downtown to see a new exhibit by Dingus, *The Girls,* at the Traver Gallery.

As I wandered around the show I fell in love with a group of dolls each named *Cage Glass Girl*. Up until this year I longed for a large piece of work by Dingus but could never choose one. Dingus is prolific and her shows are a physical and emotional overload for me. There were at least 12 versions of *Cage Glass Girl* in the show, all similar but none identical. Of course the one that I wanted was sold. I asked the gallery owner if Dingus ever took commissions–something similar, not exact, just the same kind of feel. A girl in a patchwork skirt made of fabric flowers–quiet, thoughtful, somber.

I know better than to show my prize, *CG Girl*, to some of my friends. I know that she will look sloppy to them or even dirty. I know they'll see her simple parts as nothing more than rubbish. They'll miss the fact that *CG Girl* is a feat of the imagination that bent, cut, knotted, and glued her into being.

CG Girl is perched beside the window across from my bed. The window frames Elliott Bay, a canopy of green leaves, Bainbridge Island, a marina of bobbing fiber-glass boats, and the Olympic mountain range. She is a reminder of what is at stake. Nature cannot continually yield to the modern-day cycle of hyper-consumption and waste. Humanity is only so resilient–each human-made tragedy is an assault on decency, goodness, trust, love, and wellbeing.

CG Girl is also a reminder of my father's last winter on this earth. My father was a man for whom goodness and decency came easily.

STACY LAWSON

I am irreverent–yet a good woman, wife, mother, daughter, citizen, teacher. And, I can be awful too. Let's not count the ways. Leave it that I frustrate easily, have no mechanical aptitude, and I have a mild case of oppositional defiance disorder. I will not stop arguing if I believe that I am right. Years of therapy have made me somewhat more tolerable. I still dive into the fray if I have a sense that something is not right. I don't tolerate social bullshit, bullies, fakery, right-wing politicians or their nearsighted followers. Let me sum this up–I don't cater to dysfunction, mine or anyone else's. I do not want to spend days filled with regret so I try to act from the place in me that is free from suffering. If you can convince me that I am wrong I'm happy to apologize. I've tried to teach my kids and husband how to offer a sincere apology.

I am closing my yoga studio, Red Square Yoga, after 10 years of teaching and managing it. I'm not giving up yoga–not the postures, the breathing, the meditation, the philosophy–just the time away from writing. I spend a good chunk of my day sitting with pen, paper, and computer in front of a window that overlooks Elliott Bay and the Olympic mountain range in Seattle. I like to think that I am writing worthwhile stuff that offers fresh perspectives. If I am not, at least I am untangling the knots in my psyche for the benefit of all in my life. I love to walk, knit, kayak, ski, hike, and almost anything that keeps me outdoors. Reading and knitting are as necessary as breathing. I love textiles. I could be considered a textile whore. I can spend hours stroking old fabric, rugs, yarn, roving, grain sacks, sweaters. For the last year I have been working with artist Marita Dingus to make vessels out of reclaimed materials.

My written work has been published in Under the Sun, Drash Northwest Mosaic, r.kv.r.y quarterly literary journal, Raven Chronicles, and Sunday Ink: Works by the Uptown Writers. I live with my husband, two sons, and my writing partner, Juneau, he of 4 wise paws.

IMAGE BY ANDREA WILLNER