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ART for the People



VÉRONIQUE VANBLAERE WEARS MANY HATS – ARTIST, GALLERY OWNER, ENVIRONMENTALIST – AND WHEN SHE TAKES ONE OFF, SHE’LL PROBABLY MAKE A LAMP OUT OF IT

BY NADRIA TUCKER

Walking up the front stairs feels like a visit to an eccentric neighbor – sculptures litter the yard, strange shapes peek through the windows. When you open the door you’re surrounded by lamps made from rusty engine parts and old lingerie. This is Vero’s gallery – the place that embodies her philosophy and her art.

THE WOMAN IN CHARGE

Look through a cut-out in one of the gallery’s walls, and you’ll see Véronique Vanblaere, Vero for short, sitting behind a desk, answering phones, updating her website, carrying on with the business of art. You could say she lives here – not in the traditional sense, but in the sense that everything about this place is her. Her own pieces are interspersed with the work of about 60 hand-picked local artists, and all the art here meets one criteria. In Vero’s words, “It’s art for the people.”

Born in Belgium some 36-odd years ago, Vero began her life as an artist creating jewelry and crafts with her mother’s cast-off sewing kit and spare parts from her father’s work as a TV repairman. Recycling in one sense or another has always been a huge part of Vero’s lifestyle. “In Belgium,” she says, “ninety percent of everything is recycled.” She experienced a culture shock when she moved to Birmingham in 1995 and found that

recycling was not such a big part of life in Alabama.

“It seems like here people take the place where they live for granted. I do not understand why anybody would not recycle, especially people with kids. Ignoring this problem seems like a very selfish choice.” Vero advises artists to take advantage of society’s waste, and try to use it in a positive way. “We live in a society that over-consumes, resulting in piles of trash,” she says. “Yard sales and thrift stores overflow with unwanted stuff; this is a huge amount of materials that are perfect bases for one’s artwork. What to do with all that junk except recycling it or giving it a new function, a new life as a beautiful piece of art?”

Vero’s recycled lamps are reinventions of blenders, scooter parts, colanders and anything else she can get her hands on. One light fixture features an old astronaut helmet from the stage show of a now-defunct regional band. The “Goodbye Mr. Edison,” hanging lamp is made from concentric rings of dead light bulbs, with a new incandescent bulb serving as the light source, “a wink,” she says, “to the fact that those bulbs are being replaced.”

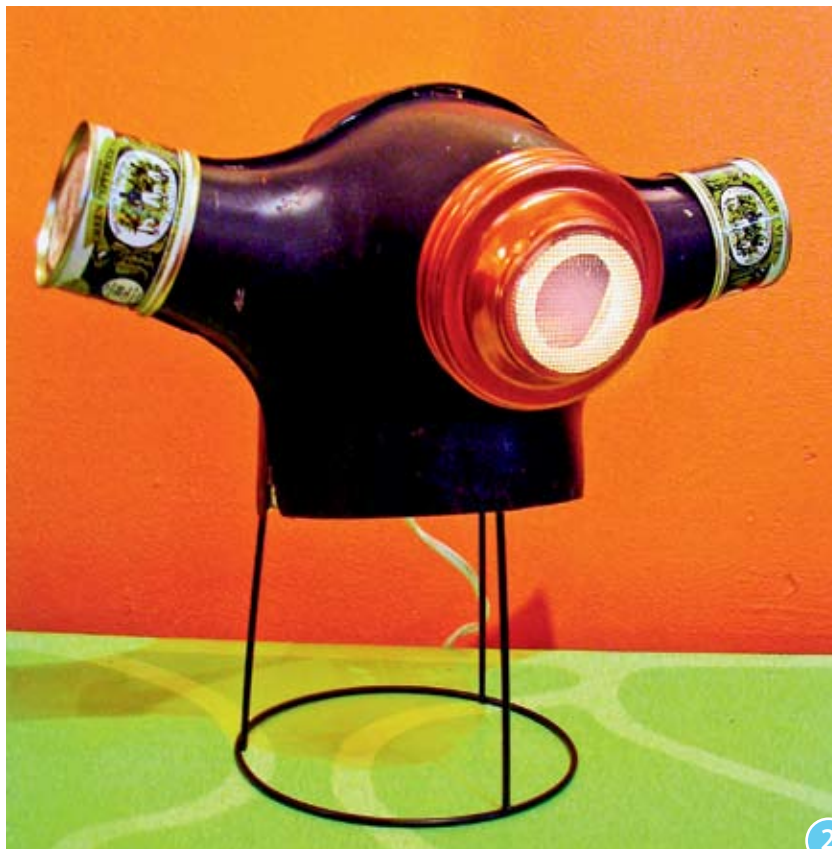
Vero sees beyond an object’s history, making lamps and magnets from Mason jar lids, the debris from her boyfriend’s scooter hobby and thrift store finds. “It’s kind of a challenge,” she says, “starting with something, rather than a blank canvas. What



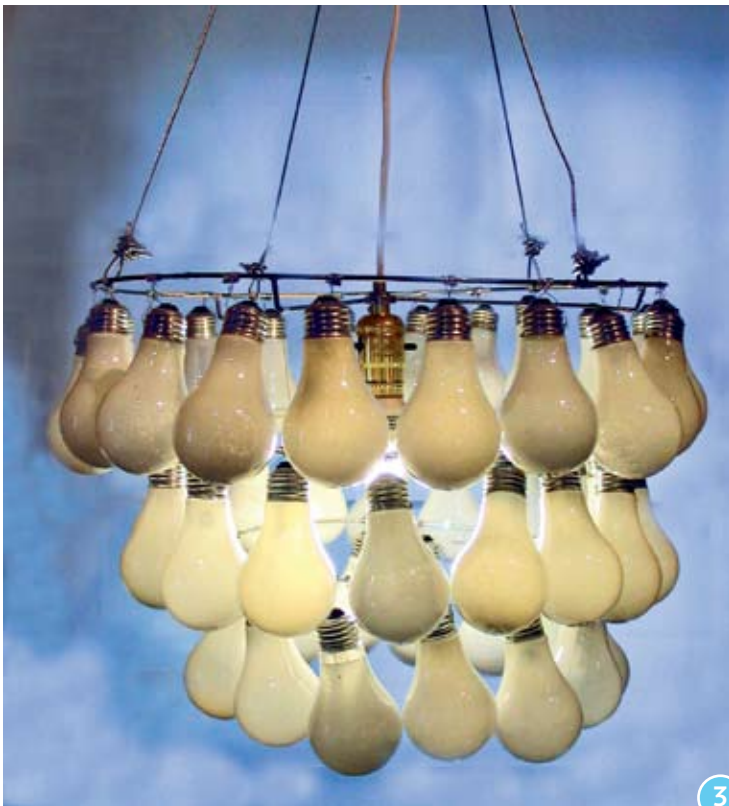
can I do with this?’... It feels good to be able to reuse it, give it a second life.”

REINCARNATION

Transformation is a theme in Vero’s art and her gallery. Naked Art was born out of collaboration between friends. When Vero moved here, she



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- 1 LAMBRETTA LAMP, \$150.
- 2 SCOOTER HEAD, \$75.
- 3 GOODBYE MR. EDISON, SOLD.
- 4 SATELITE, SOLD.

began repairing old furniture out of necessity. “I didn’t have much money,” she says. “I had to deal with what I could.” Later, she and a friend began making furniture together. They held exhibitions and showed in galleries with the ultimate dream of starting their own studio full of functional, affordable pieces, because, as Vero says, “we were tired of going to galleries and not being able to afford anything.”

In 1998, the two friends opened the gallery downtown. Vero’s business partner ultimately moved on to other projects, and Vero took over sole control of Naked Art. Location was important to the original gallery and in the subsequent move to Forest Park. “I was really looking for something that had a more European flair,” Vero says. “Downtown had a European flair, and so does this neighborhood.”

The gallery’s mission is to provide patrons with art that is functional, affordable and funky. Vero’s price cap is \$900 — the price, incidentally, of one of her own paintings. She chooses artists on (among other things) the basis of where they are in their careers; the more established an artist, the higher the price of their work. Art, she feels, should be approachable. “If I’m going to have a more expensive piece from an artist,” she says, “I want them to make smaller things, too. So that people can ooh and aah about the big piece, and buy the little one.”

Art, in Vero’s opinion, doesn’t have to make an existential statement. It can be as simple as a painted light switch plate, a Christmas stocking made from old sweaters, a pair of paper clip earrings — all pieces in the gallery with price tags under \$30.

Vero’s view on art may be unconventional, but it is what makes her gallery a destination. During our interview, an out-of-town patron calls looking for hotel suggestions the day before an upcoming open house, the second call of its kind that day, Vero says.

Art, she feels, serves a municipal function as well as a personal one. “It brings people in, brings tourists to Birmingham. Too many people don’t understand. They cut funding for the arts, and it hurts the economy.” This may be her only qualm with the city; Birmingham, she feels, is a great place to be an artist and gallery owner. “I really like Birmingham,” she says. “It’s a very easy place to live. I feel like I live in a movie ... That means I’m able to be an artist here. The business of art is not going to make you rich, but it makes you happy. So, when you get to pick, I’m going to pick happiness over fortune.”

Happiness, she says, is all about the people you’re with. The thing that strikes her most about people in Birmingham: “Southern charm.”

*Naked Art Gallery
3815 Clairmont Ave.
Birmingham, AL 35222*



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