

'Karaoke' QUEEN

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Artist twists the everyday into intriguing creations

By Geoff Edgers

GLOBE STAFF

NEEDHAM — On a high shelf in Rachel Perry Welty's kitchen sit dozens of books wrapped in aluminum foil. It is the first sign that somebody a little bit different lives inside this otherwise ordinary suburban Colonial.

Across the room, on the molding above a picture window, Welty has placed miniature cereal and toothpaste boxes, each shrunken smaller than a pack of cigarettes. Then there are the grocery stickers, hundreds of them, which she has peeled off bananas, apples, oranges, and other produce to create colorfully patterned works on paper throughout the house.

This is Welty's world, where anything can be fuel for inspiration. Her work, seen at the Institute of Contemporary Art and in galleries in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, is about twisting the everyday into funny, beautiful, or simply perplexing creations.

"She's gathering or saving materials or moments we would normally discard or delete," says Jen Mergel, associate curator at the ICA. "It's her attention to detail that makes it lyrical."

Her signature work remains "Karaoke Wrong Number" (2001-04), a nearly seven-minute long video in which Welty, sitting on the edge of her bed, masterful-

ly lip-synchs the voices of strangers who mistakenly left messages on her answering machine. At the ICA, where the piece is part of the museum's permanent collection, visitors crowded around the screen to watch the performance when it was on display until recently. Starting Nov. 14, "Karaoke" can be seen in a solo show at the Brooks School's Robert Lehman Art Center in North Andover.

In person, Welty, 46, is slim and soft-spoken, a former nationally ranked squash player who is selective when she explains what drives her creative process. Much of her work takes place at home, where she says she's "as likely to make chocolate chip cookies as work on a tinfoil sculpture."

In her upstairs studio, she's surrounded by her art, some finished, some in process. There are plastic foam take-out containers decorated with colored pen patterns and, hanging from the ceiling, a small model for "Wall," the shimmering piece with 128,000 silver twist ties that could be seen at the ICA in 2006-'07 in the museum's Foster Prize exhibition; Welty was a finalist for the award.

Looking around, it's easy to understand why Yancey Richardson, Welty's New York gallery representative, likens her work to that of Tara Donovan, the MacArthur "genius" grant winner currently being exhibited at the ICA.

"I am always hoping to get people to look at the things they normally don't look at," Welty says. "It's the small moments that



Rachel Perry Welty sits below "Karaoke Wrong Number," a video of herself lip-synching errant messages left on her answering machine, at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

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form the ballast of our lives. We have high moments and low moments. Most of our lives are spent in the pursuit of the business of living. To me, it seems a natural response to pay attention to those things. Whether it's the voice-mail messages or the fruit stickers, it's all material to me."

Welty, who also has a studio in Fort Point, is planning to leave it later this month and get a space in Manhattan to have a presence in New York. Meanwhile, she is working on "Deaccession Project." She has been getting rid of one possession every day, starting with the hairbrush she tossed on Oct. 5, 2005. Each item discarded — either sold, recycled, or given away — gets a glossy photo pasted into an album.

"I'm so struck by how much stuff comes in," she says. "We threaten to be overcome in this culture — upper, middle-class America."

Technically, Welty's a late bloomer. She didn't become a "professional" artist until her mid-30s. Truth is, she's always offered hints of her eventual line of work.

There was the lending library, complete with stamps and loan records, she set up as a girl when she was growing up in Minnesota. She built elaborate houses for her dolls using stacked shoe boxes, egg cartons, and fabric left over from her mother's projects.



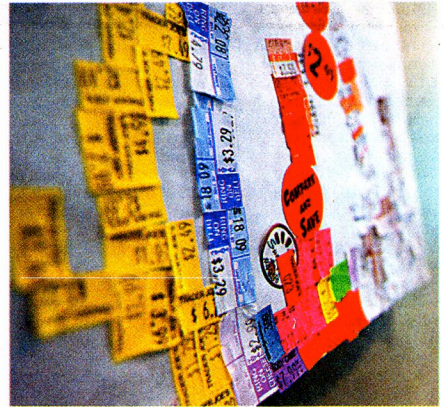
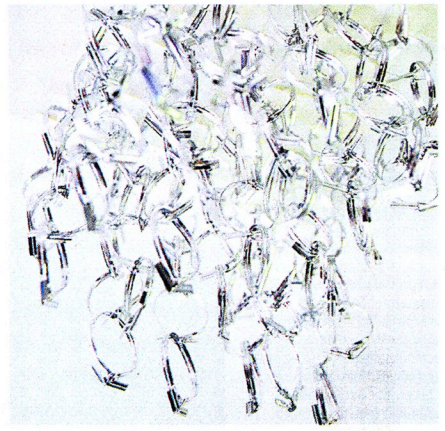
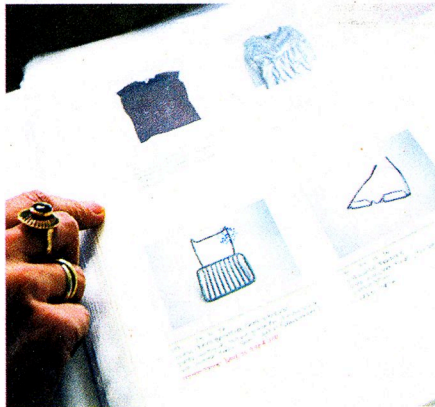
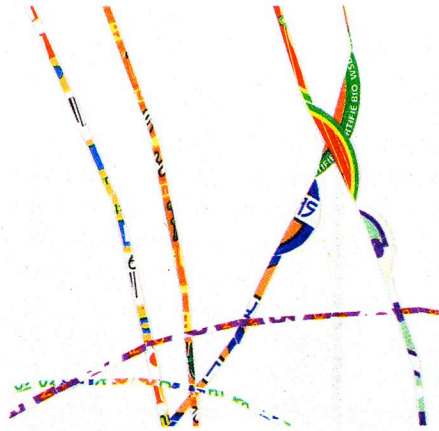
SYNCHED UP

To see a clip of "Karaoke Wrong Number" and other works by Welty, go to www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts

Later Welty, who studied English and French at Connecticut College, became an art director at an advertising firm. In the early '90s her mother, Sarah Hollis Perry, studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. Inspired, Welty joined her and graduated in 2001.

Two of the pieces she worked on during that time were inspired by her son Asa's premature birth in 1990. The boy had been kept at the hospital for three months. Welty transcribed his 645-page medical record word-for-word onto sheets of vellum. For the second piece, she used paint to color the 37-page hospital receipt.

"So it becomes this eye-pop-



STEWART CLEMENTS (TOP LEFT); PHOTOS BY SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Welty uses such materials as (clockwise from top left) stickers peeled off fruit, twist ties, and grocery stickers (for a work in progress). Above left: She is also making an album recording items she has gotten rid of since Oct. 5, 2005.

ping, joyful, Skittle thing," Welty says.

"Karaoke" came about when Welty arrived home one day and found a message from a woman who sounded like a nun. The caller told a priest that the choir couldn't possibly rehearse in a space because it was too dusty.

"It was funny but also very poignant," says the artist. "It got me thinking about those missed connections, how technology can help but also impede."

Continuing to collect messages, she knew they were useful; she just wasn't sure how. After three years, the idea emerged. Welty wrote out the text of the messages and practiced. In her bedroom, she recorded her performance, sometimes needing as many as 25 takes.

When the piece went up at the Barbara Krakow Gallery, it caught the eye of local collector Sheryl Marshall.

"We were just laughing hysterically," says Marshall. "It's all about what's wrong with technology and underneath that, the pathos and misconnections

people have in life. It's also unbelievably entertaining, the way she totally becomes those characters. What kind of mind thinks those up?"

Marshall bought "Karaoke" and later donated it to the ICA, where enthusiastic visitors left behind notes of praise. Some "tagged" the work, in the ICA's interactive computer rating system, with words that included "hilarious," "ingenious," "odd," "intrusive," "obsessive," and "surreal." According to visitor surveys, the piece is one of the museum's most popular.

Did the artist ever find out just who all of those people leaving phone messages were?

Welty admits she never tried to get in touch with them. But after the piece went on display at the ICA, she did get a call from a familiar voice.

"This is Ryan," he said, and my heart sank because it was a guy for whom one of the messages had been intended," Welty remembers. "I was so afraid he was going to be annoyed. He just burst out laughing."