



Inspired work: How Many Times Have I Cooked This Chicken? •

(mixed media collage, 8 x 10)

When Claudine Hellmuth wanted to tell a narrative about herself and her mother, she listed childhood memories. "I wanted to concentrate on the teeny, tiny slices of life because I think they tell bigger stories than the big events," she says. The memory that grabbed her was of her mother standing at the oven, wondering how many times she had cooked Hellmuth's favorite recipe, breaded chicken. "I would always latch onto one [food] item until I was sick of it," Hellmuth remembers, but as soon as her mother bought 50 boxes of macaroni and cheese, "I'd switch to peanut butter and jelly." She wanted to depict her mother cooking the same recipe over and over again, "not because she wanted to," Hellmuth says, "but because she loved me."



Inspiration: Freedom • Collage artist Claudine Hellmuth works best when she has the freedom to create just for herself, when she can count on no one else seeing it. Case in point: In art school, she finished the art portion of her thesis (a series of large-scale abstract oils) two months early. With two months to herself, "I felt really free, like I could do whatever I wanted." So she began creating tiny 5- x 7-inch collages, bringing them out of her idea books and sketchbooks and making them into finished works.

Two weeks before her thesis show, Hellmuth's professors saw her experiments and proclaimed them the best work she'd done. So she cranked up production to have enough collages for her thesis show. "I felt like I'd found something that suited my visual vocabulary, something that I could [use to] express myself even better," she says. "When I was painting, I was always thinking about how I would express myself, grasping." When she could say, "Who cares? I get to play now," her work soared.

Inspired by the creative freedom of working in private, Hellmuth thought she'd work as a secretary by day and create collages at night. "I had this romantic idea of doing thousands of collages that I would keep in my apartment and never show anyone," she says. Instead, she landed a job as a Web designer, leading her to eventually post her work online. The Internet gave her a way to show her work without watching people look at it. Soon, people began asking to buy her collages. She refused to sell

originals, still feeling the need to hold on to her creations.

By the time the Internet bubble burst and she lost her job, Hellmuth had established a career selling licensed works, workshops and a book deal for *Collage Discovery Workshop*. Then she hit a wall. "I'd been doing a vintage, Victorian style for six years, and I was repeating myself a lot," she says. "I made crap for almost a year." So she set out to get re-inspired. She tried drawing realistically to "prove" herself, but the results were forced and left her unsatisfied. Then she simply started looking at different kinds of art and writing down what pleased her. "If I really felt in my gut that I liked something, I'd write it down." Her list included elements like patterns, loose line quality and bright colors.

Soon her current style emerged; she called these collages "poppets"—a term of endearment used by her English grandmother. As typical collage goes, her poppets use a lot of white space. Each incorporates a photo element, painterly techniques and line drawing. "I really wanted to incorporate my own hand in my work because I had gotten away from that," she says. Her goal for the future is to avoid pushing a style too far while she's in it, to give herself the freedom to change again the next time she runs out of steam.

Hellmuth's second book, *Collage Discovery Workshop: Beyond the Unexpected*, is available from North Light Books. Visit the artist's Web site at www.collageartist.com.