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THE MESSENGER

Late artist's exhibit grapples with language and gender

By LAURIE GRANIERI

STAFF WRITER

Erena Rae's art has a point — in both senses of the word: Her art has an edge, and it has a reason for being.

It is bold — aesthetically, philosophically — it is occasionally brassy, biting,

accusing, even strident. It mashes together word and image, quoting statistics about the efficacy of infant massage, commenting on what the artist perceives as an erosion of the Bill of Rights, mourning AIDS victims and lamenting violence in Northern Ireland.

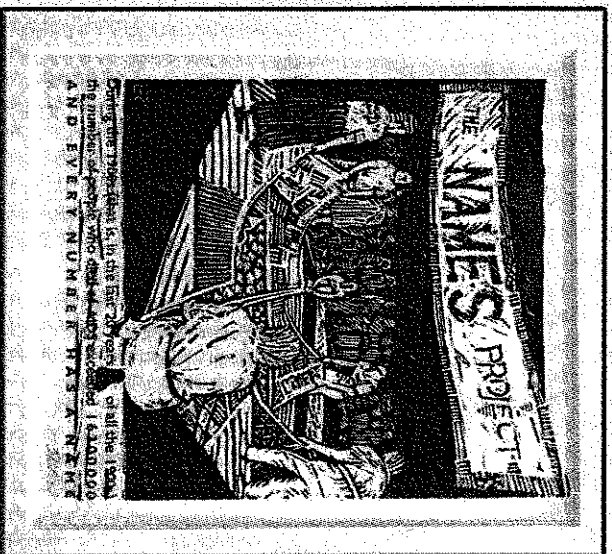
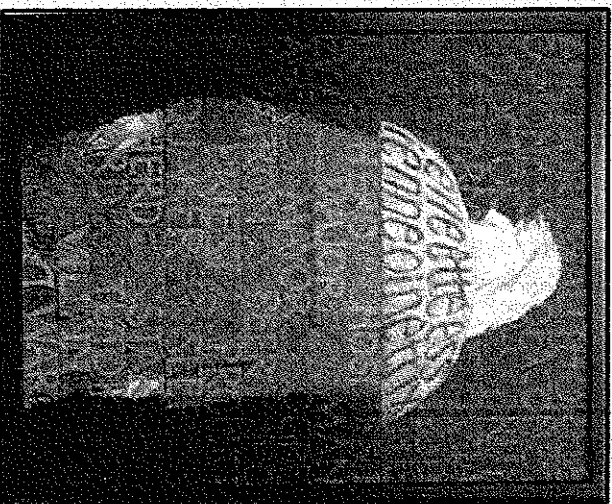
Take the digital pigment print "In Her Place (from the 'No-elle' series)": The red, black and green graphic features the female French pronoun "elle" and the diminutive suffix "ette," striking out both with a slash of red. "In the U.S. Workplace, Job Title + Suffix - 27% = Women's Wages," the print intones.

See **Rae**, Page **D6**

My childhood is very vivid to me, and I don't feel very different now from the way I felt then. It would appear I am the very same person, only with wrinkles.

—Natalie Babbitt, 1993
The Horn Book

■ Erena Rae's prints "Aging," clockwise from top, "Every Number Has a Name" and "Big Burden" are among the works on view at New Brunswick's Rabbit Gallery.



Photos by MARK R. SULLIVAN/Chief photographer



Bruce Friedrich

■ Highland Park printmaker Erena Rae, from left, with her son, Bruce Friedrich, and her husband, Gus Friedrich. "My father and I have always been her biggest fans," Bruce says of his late mother.

A strong voice for change

By LAURIE GRANIERI

STAFF WRITER

Gus Friedrich knew Erena Rae since she was a teen, back when she was an aspiring teacher named Erena Rae Bakeberg.

In the nearly half-century they were together before Rae died in May of complications from lung cancer when she was 65, Friedrich saw a lot of his wife's art. Once she left teachers college, he ground ink for her printmaking studios at the University of Kansas. He even became a docent at a gallery at the University of Oklahoma, where

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VOICE: Rae understood the power of language

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he worked as a professor in the '80s and '90s.

Friedrich saw Rae's work at school, as well as her medical illustrations at Purdue University School of Veterinary Medicine in Indiana. He saw the fruits of her graphic design business and the newsletter she edited that represented a local chapter of the National Organization for Women in Tippecanoe County, Ind.

But Friedrich, 65, is most nostalgic about the work Rae did late in her career, once she arrived in New Jersey.

"When she really started playing with computers and saw the possibility of combining her fine-arts training with design, that's when she really took off," says Friedrich of Highland Park, who took his current position as dean of Rut-

Rae's work is in the permanent collection of the Ben Shahn Galleries at William Paterson University, as well as the archives of the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., and in the Wood Engravers Network archives of Princeton University.

gers University's School of Communication, Information and Library Studies in 1998.

Rae seemed to view this work as part of an artist's statement, as well. In an artist's statement, she said: "I thought that the computer art that I produced (for my own pleasure and sanity while working for clients) did not qualify as 'art' — until the late 1990s when I first saw Barbara Kruger's powerful prints. It was only then that I stopped

trashing my own work (both figuratively and literally) and began to explore juried-exhibition opportunities for my efforts in the 'new' medium. The positive reception has emboldened me to develop my own technique to see to use words and images to point out the contrast (and sometimes unresolved tension) in words vs. deeds, sinister vs. the sublime, traditional mores vs. modern practices."

Once in New Jersey, Rae became involved in the Printmaking Council of New Jersey, as well as the Rutgers Center for Innovative Print and Paper, or RCIPP, which is part of Mason Gross School of the Arts. In fact, proceeds from sales of Rae's work on view now at the Rabbet Gallery in New Brunswick will benefit RCIPP.

"I think she had one of the strongest voices for change of anybody I'd ever seen," says printmaker Stephen Fox, a longtime member of the Printmaking Council of New Jersey. "She was an activist. Her work exemplified her desire to see society (be) a better place. She pointed out inequities."

Rae's work is in the permanent collection of the Ben Shahn Galleries at William Paterson University, as well as the archives of the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., and in the Wood Engravers Network archives of Princeton University.

Gender issues, politics and language seemed to form the foundation of Rae's printmaking.

"She really loved language," says Friedrich, who met Rae in 1959 and married her in 1962. "Her English classes were as important to her as art classes. She really got into the power of language."

Their son, Bruce Friedrich, 36, agrees.

"She felt that language, art and mathematics, which often has to do with systems, did go well together. Each of her pieces speaks volumes without requiring any additional text," he says, though Rae was big on weaving language and social activism into her images. One of Rae's prints on view now at the Rabbet Gallery in New Brunswick features 152 "BU—SH—" logotypes — one for each person executed during President George W. Bush's tenure as governor of Texas.

"Her entire being and her art was a part of who she was," Bruce says. "Her life and art both focused on comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable."

More information about Rae's art is available by visiting www.thislewoodpress.com.

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RAE: Artist's work is laced with wry humor

From Page D1

Another image from the series, the muted oil-and-oil-pastel "Big Burden," is littered with feminine diminutives such as "heroine," "hostess" and "priestess." The terms become increasingly ridiculous — "mayoress," "tutoress" and "anchoress," anyone? "Big Burden" begs the question: Is woman, like the -ess suffix, an appendage? Is she an afterthought?

Rae grapples with language and gender in the bulk of the works on view and for sale through July 28 at New Brunswick's Rabbet Gallery. A retrospective of the late Highland Park artist's work from the last two decades — many of them prints — highlights Rae's abiding interest in the inextricable link between image and text and the tension between politics, gender and language.

Rae's work does not shrink from sentiment. It is passionate, charged, unflinching. Don't think Rae won't get in your face with a bold message or an overt political agenda, even with a work as small and intricate as a hand-cut black-and-white print of what appears to be a homeless person reclining among boxes. The print is given the title "Who Cares?" Is Rae bitter? Or is she merely asking, "Who will care for this soul on this street?"

At the same time, some of Rae's art is playful and laced with a wry humor.

Her "Manners in the New Millennium Series," provocative digital inkjet works depict-

BE ALL THAT YOU CAN BE



Rabbet Gallery

■ "Little Hope" is one of the pieces by the late Erena Rae now on view at the Rabbet Gallery in New Brunswick.

ing curious objects nestled in handmade handkerchiefs, relies on contrast to good effect.

One piece declares: "Children should be seen, sassy, and loud." The proclamation is juxtaposed with a delicate hanky decorated with a butterfly. The hanky enfolds a pair of eternally grinning, decidedly sassless and silent Fisher-Price figurines.

This is a woman who was born in Minnesota in the early 1940s. She clearly knows and has witnessed a certain version of femininity propagated in the pre-Betty Friedan 1950s. One could say Rae knows it so intimately that she is the ideal person to point an unmanicured finger at this brand of womanhood and to therefore subvert it

But the art? It's hungry. It's young — if "young" implies raw and spirited and on the cusp of something so big, so meaningful, it makes your heart beat harder.

for all it is worth.

And she does: Above other Photoshopped images float twisted adages such as "Push your way to the front of the line," "Wipe your nose on your napkin or your sleeve" and "If you can't say anything nice, say it anyway." Rae's work is unafraid to lose its temper or appear unladylike.

Rae was 65 when she died of complications from lung cancer in May, a senior citizen in the eyes of the U.S. government.

But the art? It's hungry. It's young — if "young" implies raw and spirited and on the cusp of something so big, so meaningful, it makes your heart beat harder. One gets the feeling Rae was constantly on the cusp of something big and meaningful.

Rae's 2000 linocut "Aging" depicts a man peering through a camera. He squints, sending a vast network of lines around his right eye. Next to him, Rae reprints an excerpt from Natalie Babbitt's "The Horn Book":

"My childhood is very vivid to me, and I don't feel very different now from the way I felt then," Babbitt writes. "It would appear I am the very same person, only with wrinkles."

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