

## THE INTERDEPENDENT VISION OF NATASHA

The three-decade run of 4th of July parades organized by Natasha Mayers is certainly Maine's most longstanding and perhaps most significant contemporary work of activist art. Mayers has developed considerable artistry in the parade form and reveals a deep understanding of how we are all connected. Her commitment to the interdependence of all members of the community is evident in her ability to integrate her critical and activist approach within the context of the small town parade. I will share my insights as a participant in Mayers' parades that have helped to form my understanding of her art and social vision.



I have participated in two of the 4th of July parades that Natasha co-organizes with a group of friends and family. For my first venture the theme was global warming, and among the ideas she threw out, I chose to become a Maine tropical fruit grower in the pro-global warming section. When I informed her that my husband had played trumpet in a marching band in high school, she said, "Great! He can lead the parade." In the following weeks, I delved into costume-making and sewed medallions and braids on a red thrift store pajama top and wrapped a boa around a bicycle helmet for my husband Michael. Like many others, I became engaged in this activist enterprise through the festivity of making costumes.

The creative fun quickly turned into an uncomfortable moment when we got out of the car in Whitefield on July 4 with our weird signs and costumes. We were surrounded by people preparing big muscular vehicle floats like the kids in camouflage scrambling onto an R.O.T.C. truck to shoot from water guns at the crowd.

After greeting us, Natasha looked at my sparkling farmer jeans and exclaimed, "Glitter fabric paint?" with that voracious glint I've seen in the eye of many artists filing away a useful detail for their craft. Natasha then introduced me to two other women with whom my character would form a new occupation triad, a real estate agent selling new waterfront property and a dermatologist. Natasha encouraged us to walk up and "sell" the virtues of our occupations directly to the crowd. She then moved around the empty lot where we were waiting like a director of a vertically stacked play, assembling different groupings and placing them into position.

We all stood in our assigned order waiting for the tail end of the regular parade when we were to jump in. Self-consciousness dropped away as our turn arrived, and I walked along making cheerful eye contact with people and hawked my glorious vision of Maine's lucrative crop of pineapples and mangos. People clearly enjoyed the provocative joking, and I will always treasure those moments of exhilarating connection.

When we started working on this exhibition, remembering my own initial discomfort, I asked her if there had ever been political tensions expressed during the parade. "Well," she said, "once we got eggs thrown at us by a guy who thought we were making an anti-war protest. But actually that year we were portraying Whitefield's upper crust thanking the bottom 99% for tax cuts."

Natasha also explained that the firemen appreciate that her addition creates a big draw, as they benefit from various food and other side sales connected to the parade. When at her place recently to select parade props in her barn, I asked where she got several really long, sleek slabs of cardboard, primo material for a parade artist. She patted them affectionately and said, "The firemen drop them off." Then added with a wry smile, "though they have never actually told me they like what we do in the parade."

—Carolyn Eyler  
USM Director of Exhibitions and Programs