

A r t i n

GRACEANN WARN INFUSES

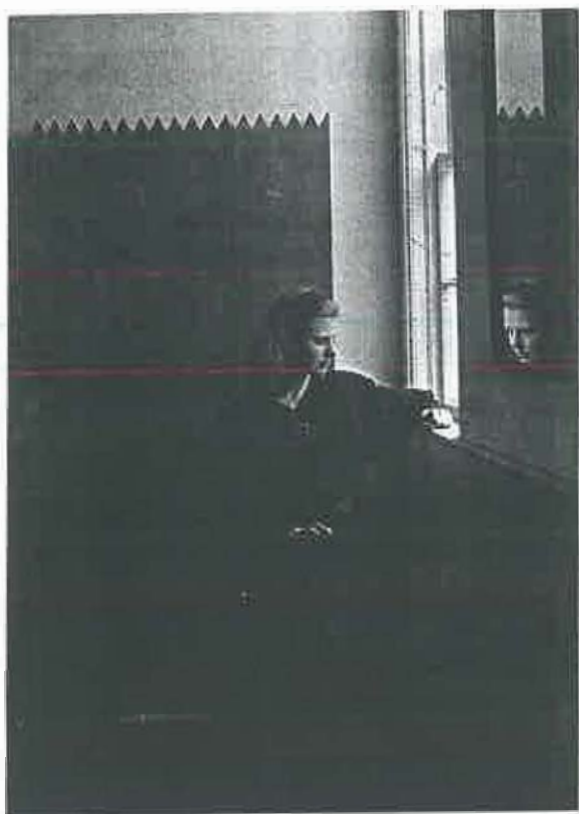
HER WORK WITH A SENSE

F o u n d

OF HISTORY.

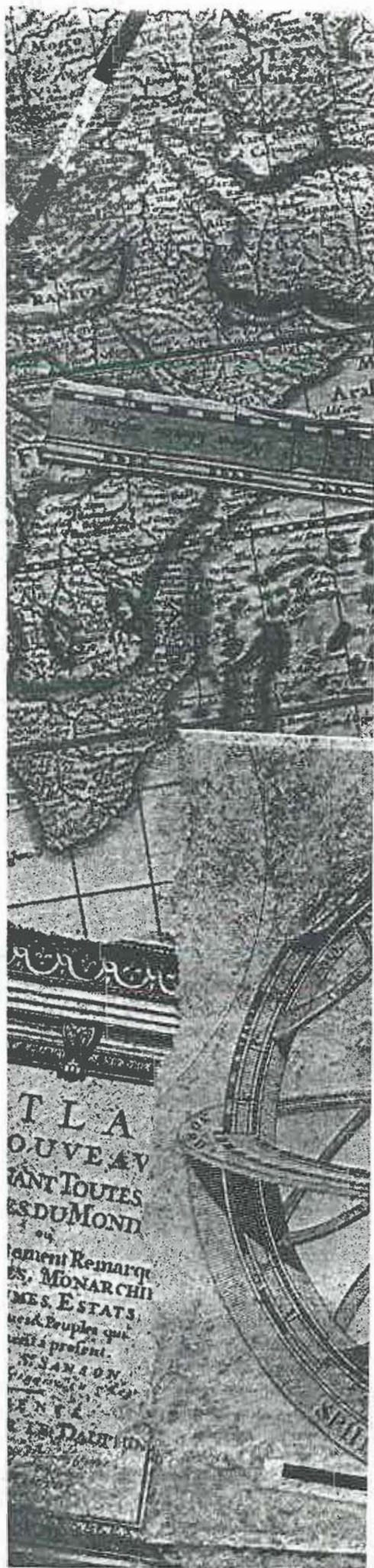
O b j e c t s

BY CINDY FRENKEL Graceann Warn's parents always said she had a lot of her maternal grandfather in her. Working as a carpenter in a zinc mine by day, he built his own house at night. He found all the stones for the foundation, and salvaged most of the wood. The living room in the northern New Jersey home had oak floors trimmed with mahogany, and all the attic joists were of different woods—some still had bark on them.



A Victorian garden gate adorns one wall of the house Graceann shares with her husband. "We've created our own slower world here," she says.

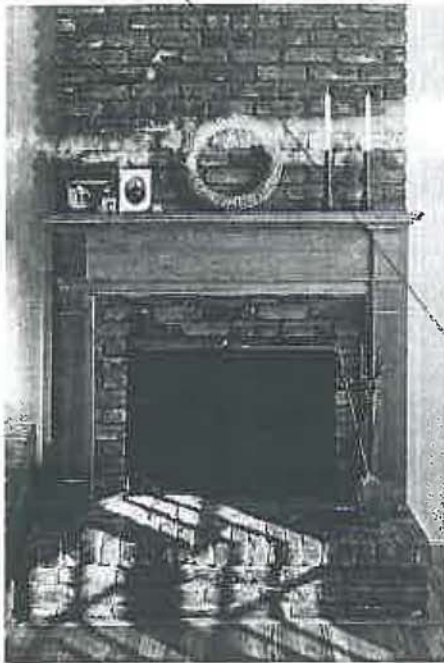
"Come to think of it," says the 34-year-old collage artist, "our attic joists are all different woods too." She's referring to the one-room schoolhouse in Ann Arbor, Michigan, that she and her new husband, Geoff Michael, live in and are renovating. By trade Geoff is a recording engineer, but he has done a lot of construction. Given their backgrounds, it makes sense that they're doing all the renovation themselves—from building a second floor to installing central air conditioning.



Don't: The neutral tone of our classical mantel (*right*) is fine, but the look is too sparse. The duck decoy—too rustic and masculine for the classical style—and the two small boxes on the left are insignificant.



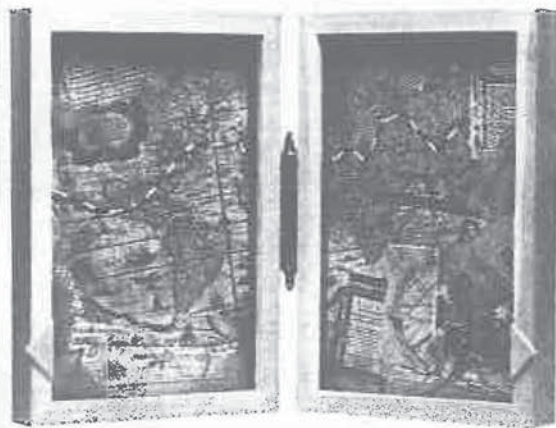
Do: More weight on the mantel (*below*) created a look that's much more pleasing to the eye. We took the print off its hook and added another, slightly smaller one—leaning against the wall, they fill out the space beautifully. The clock, though contemporary in style, has architectural qualities that interplay with those of the prints and the mantel itself—it becomes a pediment for the columnar mantel, creating a unified feel. The height of the pictures is mirrored by the art vases and fresh flowers.



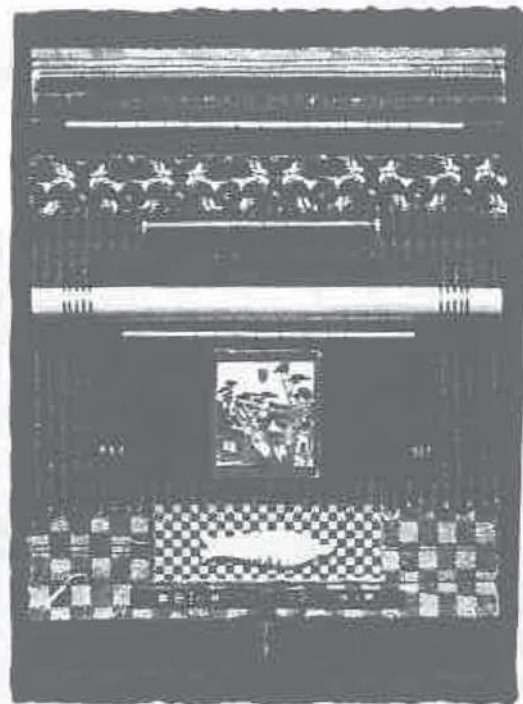
Don't: The smattering of objects on our natural pine mantelpiece (*above*) are lost against the massive brick fireplace. The straw wreath, too small to enhance the mantel, fades into the background, while the few candles and pictures are so understated they're almost invisible.

Do: With the proper symmetry, our mantel (*left*) comes to life. The larger mirror with its wooden frame is key to brightening up the dense brick of the fireplace: The mirror reflects light away, breaking up the space, and its size balances with the dominant mantel. The picture frames aren't any larger, but one is now placed atop a pile of books for the illusion of bigness; the single candle placed among the pictures harmonizes with the grouped candles on the right—the different heights and types of candleholders here add weight to balance the mantel. The cushions and wooden box bring color to the floor, adding bulk for an up-and-down symmetry.

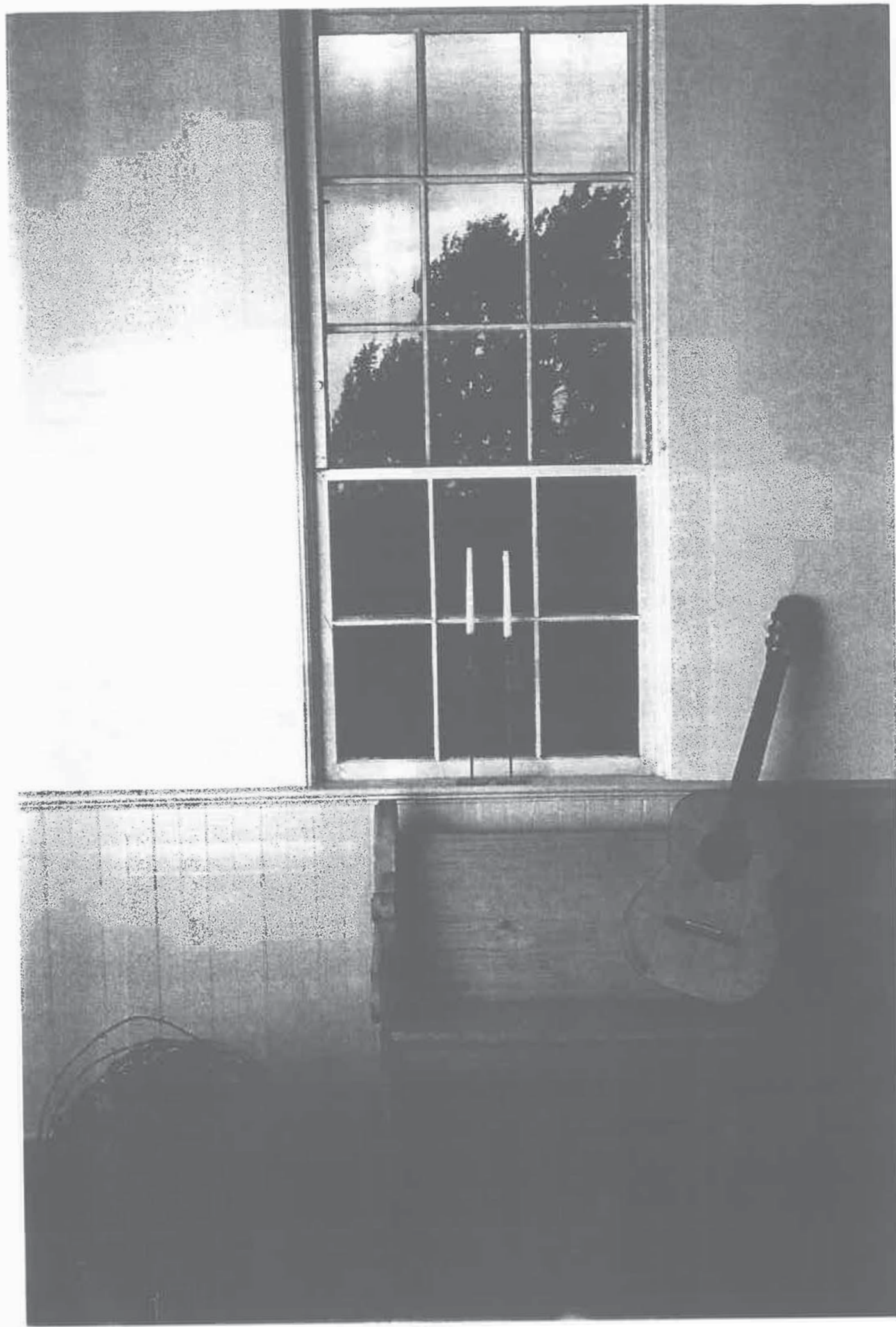




Graceann's love of traveling and collecting come together in "Travel Book," above (detail, left). Her shadowboxes incorporate the treasures she collects.



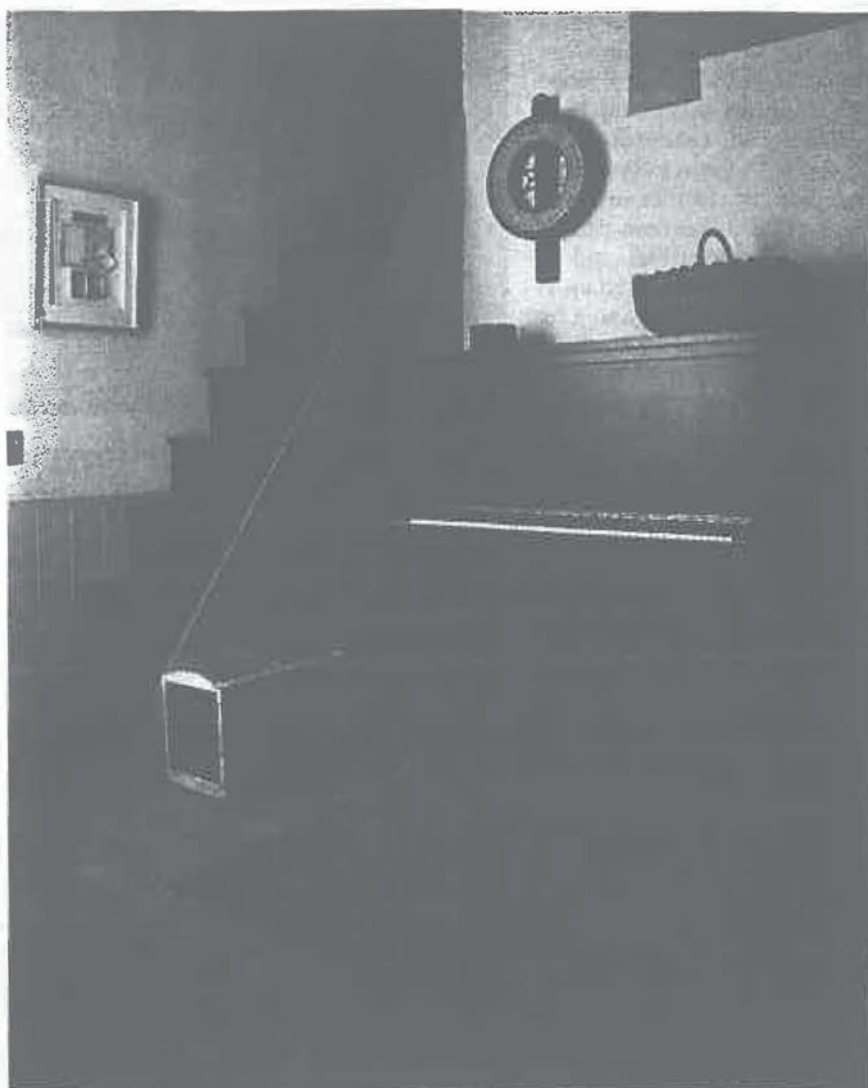
"Oriental Tapestry," above, is a colorful example of Graceann's "production" pieces. She produces 10 to 15 pieces a week with an assistant's help.



This love of construction and collecting is also integral to Graceann's collages, which incorporate a variety of found objects. Travel and architecture are important themes for her. So are luck and chance. "I'm fascinated with what people deem important and hold dear—inanimate objects that become symbols of luck—amulets, talismans and lucky charms. When I incorporate these symbols in a collage, my hope is that the collage will become a symbol for the person who will own it."

Understandably, Graceann loves flea markets. On a deeper level, she finds herself drawn to archeology and plans on starting a master's degree program this fall. "Naturally I'm interested in the objects themselves," she says, "but it's also the idea of layering, covering and uncovering, things buried in the earth waiting to be discovered. In my collages I tend to make things appear worn, aged, with a sense of history. It's the uncovering that's evocative of mystery, the fact that there's so much to be unveiled to get to the very essence, the most potent part of the thing." The romance in Graceann's work is in its mystery—the hint of something deeper that's left to the imagination like a half-wrapped present one isn't allowed to open. This lets the owner take an active part in interpreting the art, and lets the art fulfill different roles.

Graceann is at her studio by eight in the morning, and often works until eight



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The uncluttered look of Graceann's one-room-schoolhouse/home, far left and above, contrasts with the rich textures and colors of her collages. The layers of works like "Domatne," left, seem to hint at deeper meanings that Graceann leaves to the imagination. "My hope is that the collage will become a symbol for the person who will own it."

at night. The 800-square-foot room in a vintage Ann Arbor building has unfinished wood floors, brick walls and high ceilings. Her taste runs from romantic Victorian to eye-catching folk art. Fabrics in black and white stripes and checks drape the work tables, and an old tin retablo she picked up in Santa Fe ("I was drawn to it by its house shape and iconic feel") hangs on the wall.

She starts her day by going over a list of work she owes galleries, then spends the morning making collages. She creates roughly ten to fifteen pieces each week, a work schedule that requires the help of an assistant. Each collage begins with the creation of the backing—narrow strips of fabric and rectangles of unusual paper and fabrics sewn together into a collage. Onto this background Graceann adheres (by sewing or gluing) a variety of three-dimensional objects—African trade beads, copper coins and thin moldings and dowels that are painted or covered in paper



Of her studio, above, Graceann says: "Paying rent on a place whose purpose was where I'd create art was a step in taking myself seriously."

The dowels are glued down, but for added insurance they're also sewn—often in neat rows of gold thread, which also adds a decorative element. She works in black and white or in deeply saturated colors: purple, blue, teal, emerald green, dark raspberry. Each piece is framed in a "shadow box," with the glass at a distance from the collage to create depth. The col-

lages range in size from 12" x 9" to as large as 40" x 30". Prices for the smaller pieces begin at \$120; the largest works fetch over \$1000. With their straight lines and ordered composition, they have an architectural beauty. The sale of these pieces supports her, and the things discovered in them she explores further in her larger, more abstract collages.

For a recent Alice in Wonderland series, for example, Graceann searched for Victorian photographs of women who looked like Alice might have looked as an adult. The boxes are about Alice looking back at her childhood, and

incorporate such items as a queen-of-hearts playing card, chess pieces, copies of illustrations from the original Alice books and snippets of key phrases such as "croquet ground" and "tea party." Sometimes she'll create two smaller boxes and attach them with Victorian hinges, as she did for one in the Alice series. Inside one of her collages is a Victorian keyhole with a mir-

ror behind it; if you look closely into the keyhole, you see your own reflection.

These boxes are much less colorful than what she calls her "production" pieces. Over a background that might include old maps, pages from travel books, scientific illustrations or elegantly scripted letters, she sponges on white paint or metallic watercolor to create an old, mysterious feeling. Instead of shadow box frames, she covers each piece with glass or painted wire mesh. Because of the intense feelings these pieces evoke in her, she works on them only in spurts; she estimates each takes a week to make.

With most of her pieces, the act of collecting is the catalyst for what happens next—a piece doesn't begin with a sketch but with an African coin, for example, or an antique ebony and ivory domino. Her studio shelves are a treasure trove of supplies: bingo numbers, ticket stubs, new or old cards (playing and tarot). A drawer labeled



At the "assembly table" in Graceann's studio, above, all her materials are within reach. "Satellite," a work-in-progress, is at right.

"primo found junk" holds industrial objects, like a rusty washer. Drawers of paper include Japanese rice paper and marbled paper, which she makes.

During lunch she'll meet with friends to break up the solitude, or meander into a used bookstore or bead shop in search of objects to use in her work. Afternoons are spent taking care of business: correspondence to gal-

leries, packaging and setting up framing for an assistant.

Time away from the studio is spent at the schoolhouse, whose grey-blue facade has a Shaker-like simplicity. Inside, high ceilings create a loft-like feel. "The rest of society can be fast paced, but we've created our own slower world here," Graceann says, opening the window to let in Alley, the cat. "We haven't made any screens yet."

It's a carefully edited home where unusual objects that might go unnoticed elsewhere are focal points. Graceann's sense of beauty isn't restricted to conventional standards. A

metal guard that once wrapped around a telephone pole to protect it from traffic now stands on a custom-built shelf in the living room. Its russet and turquoise patina looks like an intentional wash. "I can't tell you how many people, including artists, have asked me who made this," Graceann says.

A Ming green Victorian garden gate hangs on one wall like a painting, and

built-in white bookshelves house an aquarium where fish swim in turquoise water. An unstained antique church pew faces a piano painted deep turquoise, the same shade as steps leading upstairs. Next to the pew sits a large, rusted ball of bailing wire that was left on their property by a farmer. "We found it under brush, with all these plants growing through it," Graceann says. "It was like a piece of indigenous sculpture. We liked the way it looked, and the fact that it came from

our land, so we dragged it into the house. Our neighbors, who are farmers, thought we were really weird."

Graceann's work life and personal life are clearly in harmony these days, though this wasn't always the case. She was born in Fort Dix, New Jersey, where her father was stationed in the Air Force. During her childhood they moved often: to Montana, California, Madrid (where she began school). When she was in high school, they moved to the New Jersey home her

grandfather had built, which they'd inherited.

She didn't know anyone in the arts while growing up, but her mother, a nurse, was a source of inspiration with her quilting, sewing and weaving. Graceann sewed, and cordoned off part of her room to oil paint. "My mom always encouraged me," she recalls. "She even had my paintings professionally framed."

In 1973 Graceann went to Michigan State University to study veterinary medicine. It wasn't a good fit, and she switched majors several times—from journalism to advertising to packaging design—until she finally settled on landscape architecture. It appealed to her because of the combination of the design discipline and the construction aspect.

After graduating in 1978, she worked for about a year for the City of Akron (Ohio) Planning Department on the revitalization of its downtown. Then she moved to Ann Arbor where she worked for a small design firm whose size enabled her to be involved in all phases of a project. But it grew frustrating. "Public housing projects weren't innovative, and politics, budgets and other people's opinions on design grew tiresome."

At night, for her own pleasure, she began doing collage. She would watercolor on paper, then tear it up and reassemble it. She liked collage—the variety of materials and being able to move things around without planning. After her first commission—from her boss, who had seen her work in her home—her confidence grew, and she began to enter local art fairs on weekends.

In late 1982 she rented a 10' x 10' studio above the Ann Arbor Art Association, where seven other artists worked full time. Seeing them exert the same daily discipline with their art as with any other job taught her that art was a legitimate way to earn a living. "Paying rent on a place whose sole purpose was where I'd create art," she says, "was a major step in taking myself seriously."

Graceann quit the design firm early the next year and took on freelance consulting jobs with landscape architecture firms. And she worked at more art fairs. The year was frantic; afraid of not having enough money, she had taken on too much work. By year's end she stopped consulting and took out a substantial loan to help support herself.

In 1985 she was accepted to the American Craft Show in Baltimore, a

highly competitive juried show held each year. "It changed my life," Graceann says. "I booked my whole year at that show with galleries and commissions. I'm still working with people I met then. And I met other artists whose art was their life. It was intoxicating."

In the Baltimore show the following year, she was offered a month-long artist-in-residence grant at Artpark in Lewiston, New York. There, removed from other concerns, she focused on her work. Large-scale installations by other artists, which were displayed on site, excited her and gave her the idea of merging landscape architecture with collage. It was here that she began to

introduce old maps into her work.

Graceann's past insecurities about not having had formal art training were dissipating, and she began to feel more confident about her work. By the time she went to Artpark, she had finally come to understand her medium: now she was ready to concentrate more on content. She also felt more secure and able to express herself more fully. "It takes a long time to get your work to say what you want it to say. It's a very vulnerable feeling, scary and intimidating. But I finally felt confident, I felt I had a right to feel the way I did."

As her work came together, so did her personal life. Later that year, friends introduced her to Geoff Michael. "He

was hysterically funny—which was just the tonic for me at that time. He's one of the most intelligent people I know and very visually oriented too." They were married this spring.

Now it's back to work and plans for the future. Graceann wants to focus more on her in-depth pieces, to travel more, learn more. "I'm not where I want to be yet. It's like clarifying in cooking," she says. "I want to clarify my message and make my work undeniably potent." □

Cindy Frenkel is a Detroit-based freelancer who writes about crafts and the arts.