

# ART VOICES

MAGAZINE

## On the Road to Fame: Gillian Jagger

by Gordon Brown  
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GILLIAN JAGGER, making a mold

## ON THE ROAD TO FAME: Gillian Jagger

"Look around the galleries, pay particular attention to relatively unknown artists, pick out your candidates for future fame and write a series of articles about them!" These were the instructions telephoned to me from Rome by our Editor and Publisher, creator of the ideas that have made this magazine so different. My editor's instructions sounded simple; but what if my choice of "the artists most likely to succeed" boomeranged? What if the artist I picked, instead of achieving success, failed utterly and became the laughing stock of the press and public? Well, I must say, no such catastrophe occurred. No sooner had I picked Gillian Jagger, exhibiting sculpture molded from manhole covers at the Ruth White Gallery, than she became a success. It sounds remarkable, doesn't it? But it really happened in the following way:

I had to interview Gillian Jagger, of course, because I wanted to know exactly why the New York City sewer system and manhole covers charmed her so. Before encountering Jagger, all I knew about sewers was that a family of alligators was found living in a by-passage in one of them, a few years ago. Jagger told me that a horse once fell into a manhole. His owner rushed to the sewer outlet, which happened to be on the waterfront, and, sure enough, the horse, propelled by a tremendous gushing of water, was soon seen serenely sailing out to sea. Suddenly, the animal made a frantic about-turn and successfully swam back to shore. It was noted that he carefully avoided a strong ocean current that was leading him straight back to the sewer outlet. Jagger is much more attracted to sewers than the swimming horse in her story. She really loves sewers. So do I after looking at her remarkable molds of manhole covers. Jagger tells



...mme that a good sewer never smells, although it is true that the gases it generates sometimes cause explosions. In such cases, a manhole cover may suddenly and mysteriously leap up into the air. Woe betide the sculptress who is sitting on a manhole cover, making her mold, at such a moment! She and her artwork will be abruptly blown sky-high. Such an experience could, at best, afford Jagger a good bird's-eye view of the street, which is actually the point of view and subject matter that she favors; but the danger involved would hardly justify a deliberate attempt to carry out the experiment.

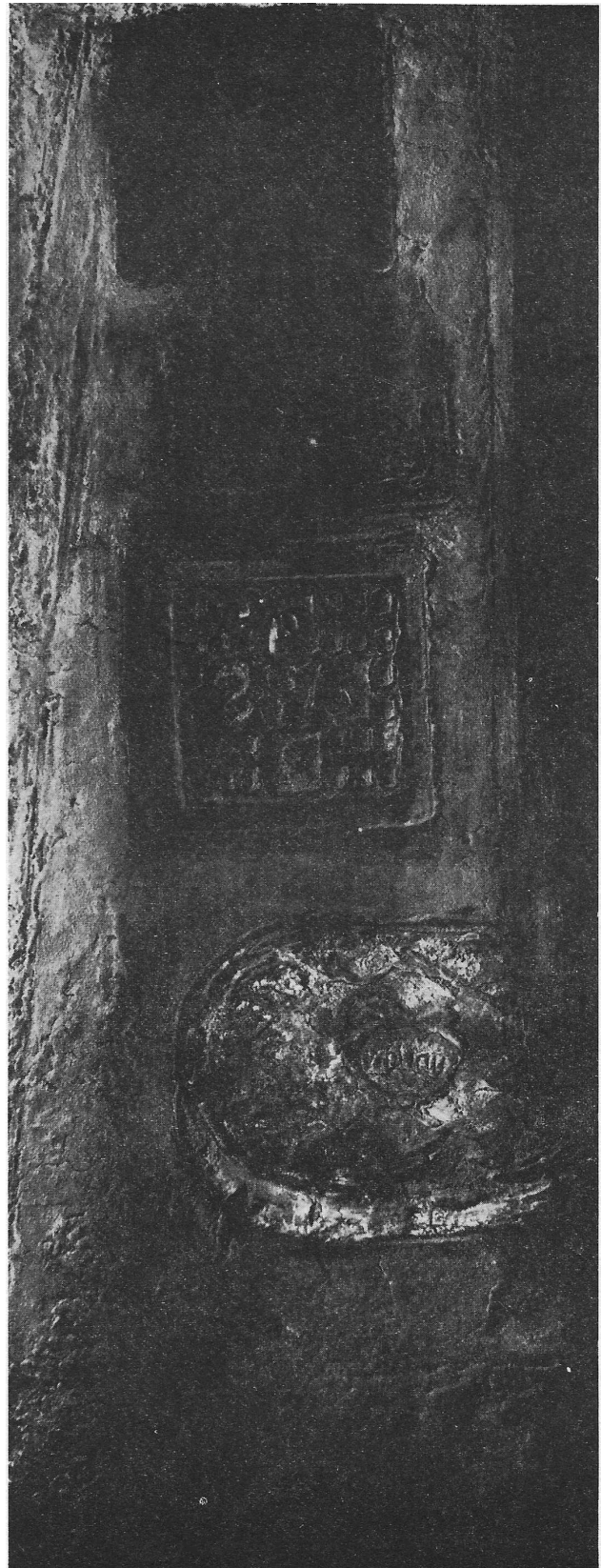
Jagger has thus far avoided such explosions, but her introduction of new motifs into the field of the fine arts is, itself, explosive from the esthetic point of view. The new elements that Jagger has inserted into her reliefs are realistically modeled manhole covers, automobile-tire-marks, hoofprints, pawprints, footprints, shadows cast by human beings and even light reflections on streets and roads. All of these motifs are successfully combined with her basically Abstract-Expressionist style, giving that school of painting a much needed shot-in-the-arm, changing it, in fact, into something quite new. Jagger has made a mold directly from a muddy bridle path in Central Park. It has all the beauty of the textural studies made by some of our abstractionists, but there are horseshoe marks and indentations left by a bicycle and a tractor that immediately lead us back to the everyday reality of the road. By revealing the abstract beauty of the commonplace, Jagger enters the mainstream of the best artistic thought of our decade.

As Jagger and I discussed her sculptures (or are they really paintings?), which cover the walls of her studio, I found that my notes were evolving into a press release. Together, we composed a statement on Jagger's act and sent it to the "New York World-Telegram and Sun." Neither of us know the editor of that newspaper, but we do think he is doing a wonderful job, especially since he picked up our lead within a matter of days and published a beautiful, illustrated, feature story by Maxine Lowey.

Never let anyone tell you that stories in the popular press are of no value to the artist. As a result of the "World Telegram and Sun" article no less than four major television networks began negotiating with Jagger for appearances. CBS News, with Walter Cronkite, took six hours filming Jagger at work in her studio and on the street. During the take, C.B.S. had to protect Jagger from the police who, for the first time, became suspicious of the art of molding manhole covers. The distant "London Daily Telegraph" did a feature story on Jagger. The English have always been interested in "rubblings" taken from sculptured reliefs. Jagger's new technique must have intrigued them. In our own country, a feature story was circulated by the Associated Press insuring national press coverage.

After rereading my own first statement and what others have seen written about Jagger's unique art, I offer the following observations:

There are 683,000 manholes in New York City; but perhaps the only people interested in them are artist Gillian Jagger and her friends, the 20,000 technicians and laborers employed by half a dozen different companies and sub-companies, who are responsible for the upkeep of the manholes.



"4:18 A.M.," by GILLIAN JAGGER





"Kill Mary," by GILLIAN JAGGER

For Jagger, manhole covers are gateways to the mysterious world beneath the city, enigmatic symbols whose rough surfaces only incidentally prevent skidding and slipping, drain off water, and carry the identifying marks of the owning companies.

Gillian Jagger, a handsome blonde, who looks anything but professional, teaches art at Post College of Long Island University. She loves the beauty and variety of designs found on manhole covers. She feels that manhole covers, though unnoticed by the millions of people who pass over them, are really among the most permanent features of the rapidly changing face of New York. Some of the manhole covers that Jagger has re-created in her relief sculptures are a hundred years old. She believes that manhole covers, especially when

weather-beaten and worn out through use, convey the same feeling of timelessness that she has found in Egyptian wall-carving. As in Egyptian art, the appearance of permanence engenders a sense of security.

Gillian Jagger's point of departure, for her current exhibition, is actually far more modern than Egypt. As she puts it, "I like the way Le Corbusier pressed wood grains into his cement blocks in the Fine Arts Building at Harvard. I immediately began to make plaster impressions of interesting pieces of metal, that I found here and there on the roadways.

"When I arrived on the island of Ibiza, off the Spanish coast, I saw some Phoenician gravestones and continued to make impressions in plaster, sometimes adding the subtle color effects of the earth and sand that I saw around me. They have a clay in Ibiza that is a fine burnt sienna. The sands around the island are actually red, yellow and blue-white. I am not interested in similar variations of color, as manifested under changing weather conditions, on American roads and streets. Asphalt in the rain, tar on a hot day, cement mixed with various sand shades as seen under neon lights."

On a typical expedition in search of beautiful manhole covers, Jagger finds herself so loaded down that she has to stuff a house painter's brush, a box of green soap, an oil can and a bottle of water down the waist of her blue jeans, use a push cart or else grip some of her tools of her art between her teeth. She cannot use her arms because, with them, she is carrying boards or stretched canvas covered with wet plaster. She heads for the selected manhole cover, wipes it off and prepares it to receive the plaster with soap or oil. To make her mold, she simply slaps down the wet plaster. Wiping her hands on her shirt-tails, she immediately removes the plaster, examining critically the details of the impression.

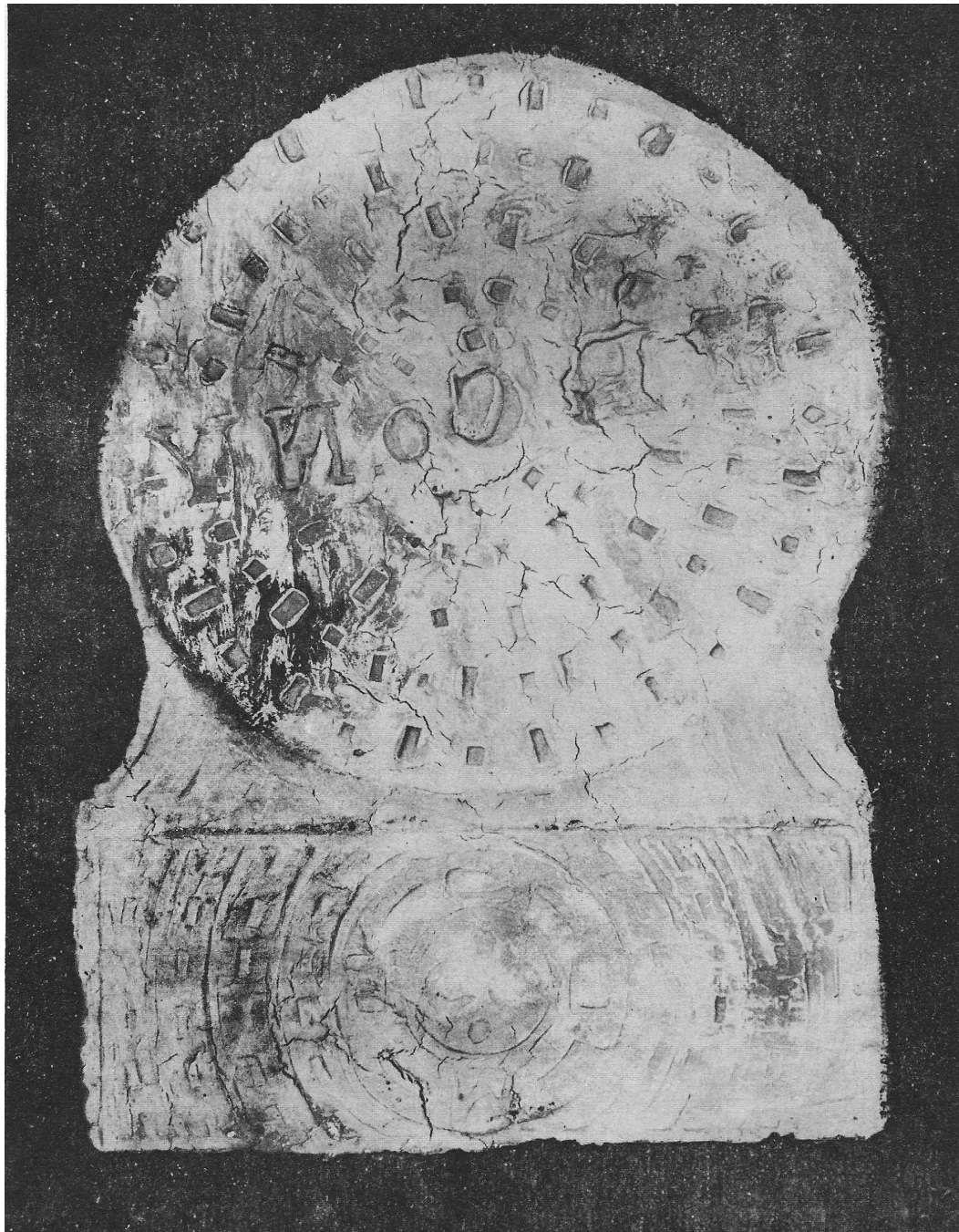
Bystanders who watch Jagger at work in the street are disinterested, interested or hostile. The artist related, "Once two people were standing on my chosen manhole cover. I began working at it, but they paid no attention to me and did not budge. I must say their dog was slightly interested. Finally I had to gently tap their feet. They moved, but still didn't look.

"Civil engineers and ordinary workingmen, connected with the maintenance of manholes, are among the most enthusiastic of the bystanders who watch me work. A Con Ed man exclaimed, 'It's a great idea! That's the real New York!' A passing woman remarked, 'A great idea for what? Next thing you know, one of them things'll hang in the Museum of Modern Art like Pop Art.'"

Actually, this passing woman made a profounding critical remark. Thank God! Jagger's manhole covers serve no practical purpose, although they do call our attention to beauty seen "on the road." They are definitely works of art and are related to Pop Art. Whatever we may think of Campbell's Soup cans and Brillo boxes of Pop Art, which look like replicas but are claimed to be transformations, there is no question that Jagger transforms the industrial designs of manhole covers into fine art. She attains this happy result through coloration, texturing and careful composition that brings into focus the eternal war between man's attempt at permanence in the objects that he creates and the natural forces of corrosion, erosion and destruction.

G. B.





"Gansevoort St.," by GILLIAN JAGGER