



20 Phyllis Ewen

Written by Lisa DeBenedictis

Phyllis Ewen: Taking Art to a Science

One doesn't usually associate science with art, but for Phyllis Ewen, the two are inextricably linked.

"Even my first pieces [of art] were more organic and about nature," says Ewen, taking pause to sip her cup of tea. "I never took science. My son, though – he is a scientist."

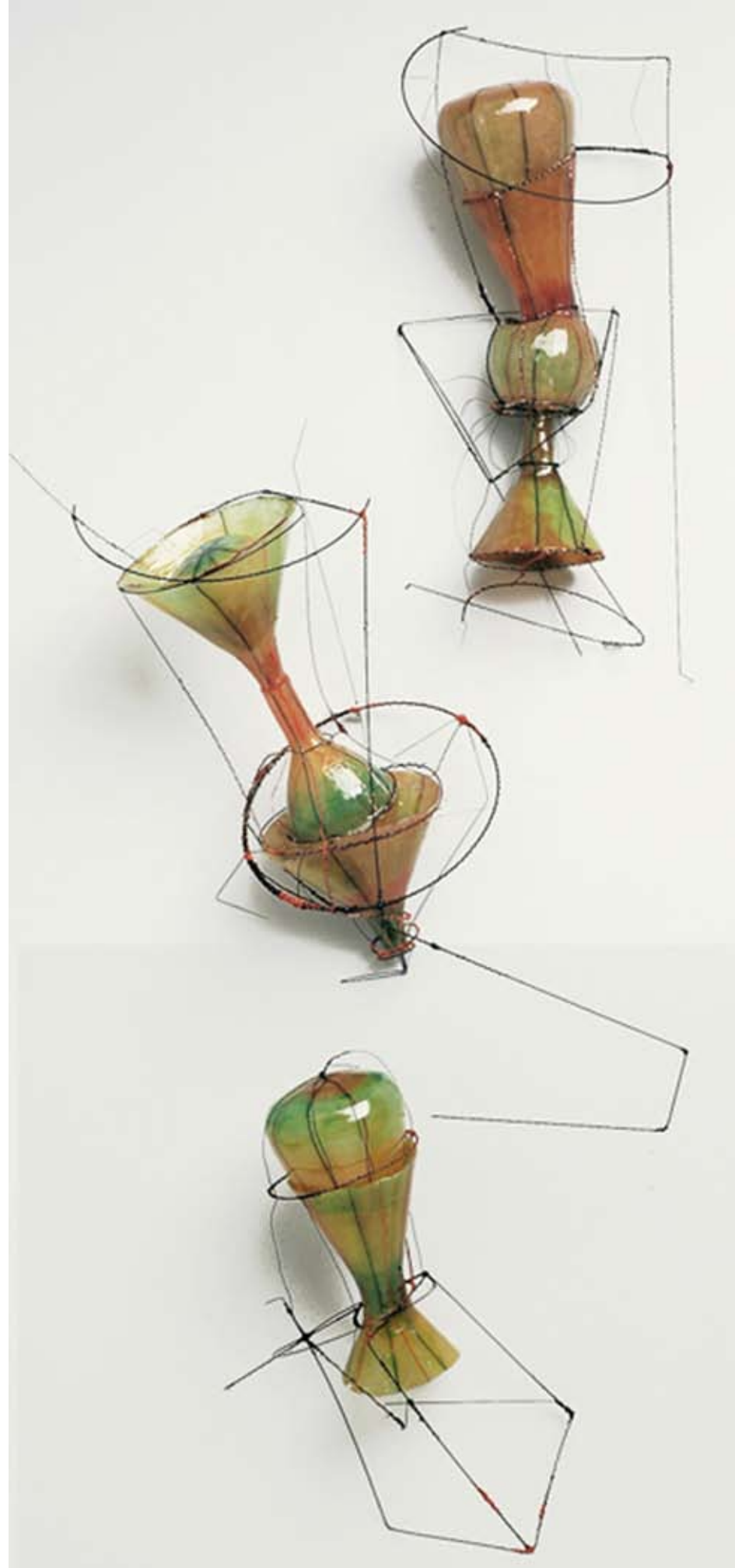
Ewen herself has silvery curls and a soft, soothing voice. Her art studio is located in Somerville. She was among the first to purchase the space at Brickbottom, a local warehouse and artist collective.

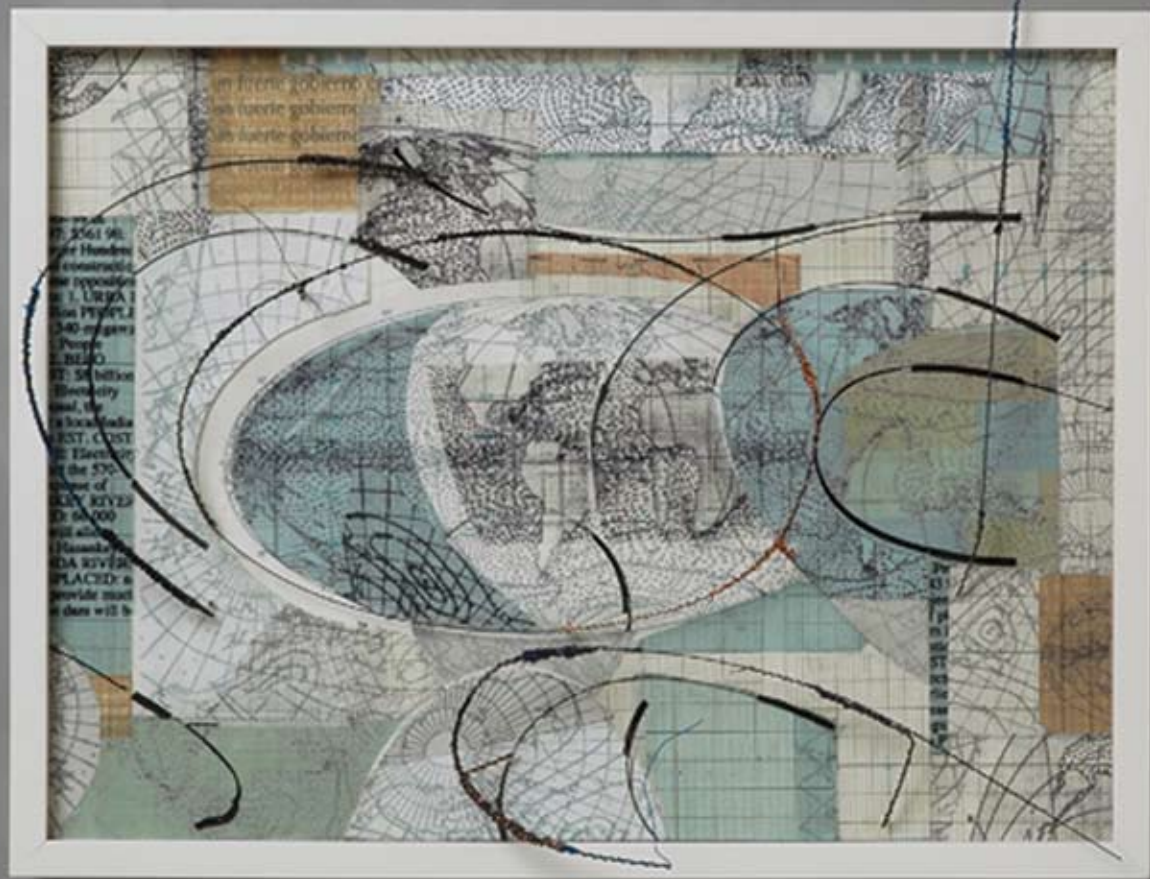
Inside her studio, the light filters in a pale yellow glow through the opaque shades – a necessary addition, according to Ewen, who admits that the sunlight can actually be too strong to work sometimes – not to mention hot.

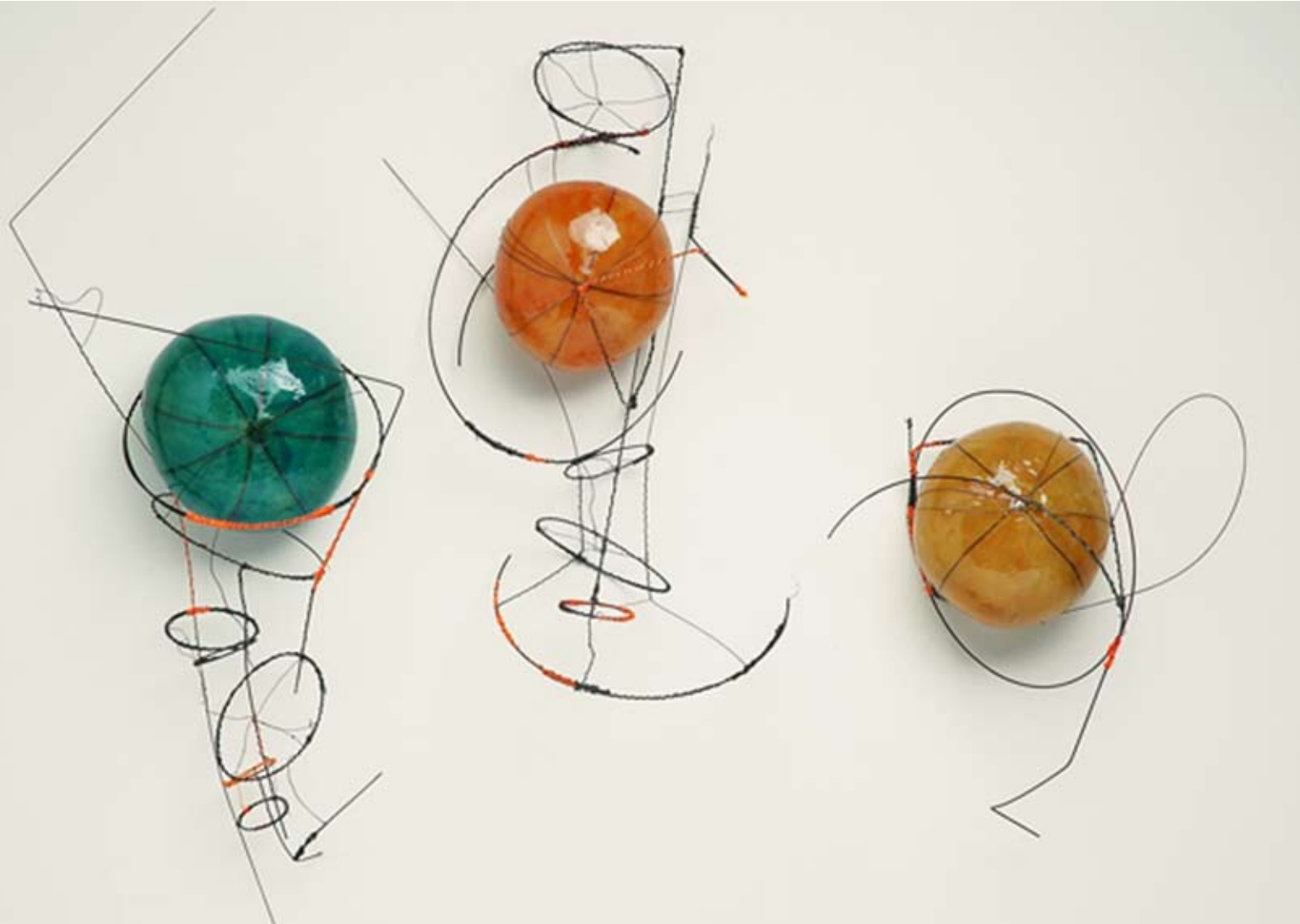
Her workspace consists of a small kitchen, an office, and a center room with high ceilings and a massive panel of windows (hence, the shades). Her favorite pieces are hung on the white-washed walls, scattered piles of CDs line the windowsill, and on her large work table lies a few scattered papers and a copy of the book *Water Matters*. Her dog, Django, dozes off in the corner.

Ewen leads me through the evolution of her work chronologically, beginning with Brandeis, where she studied painting during her undergraduate years. Her mother had wanted her to go to a women's college, but as Ewen notes with a wink, "they didn't have studios."

In her early twenties, however, after getting her masters in art history from Harvard, Ewen took a hiatus from painting and turned to photography.







“Because of my social interests, photography seemed like a way that everyone could understand it,” she explains. “I stopped painting for a while. Then I realized that it wasn’t a choice. I had to do it.”

Since then, Ewen has not only returned to painting, but also expanded her choice of mediums to wood, latex, wire, glass, mixed media and even outdoor carpeting.

“I was always taking materials and not using them the way I was supposed to,” she explains.

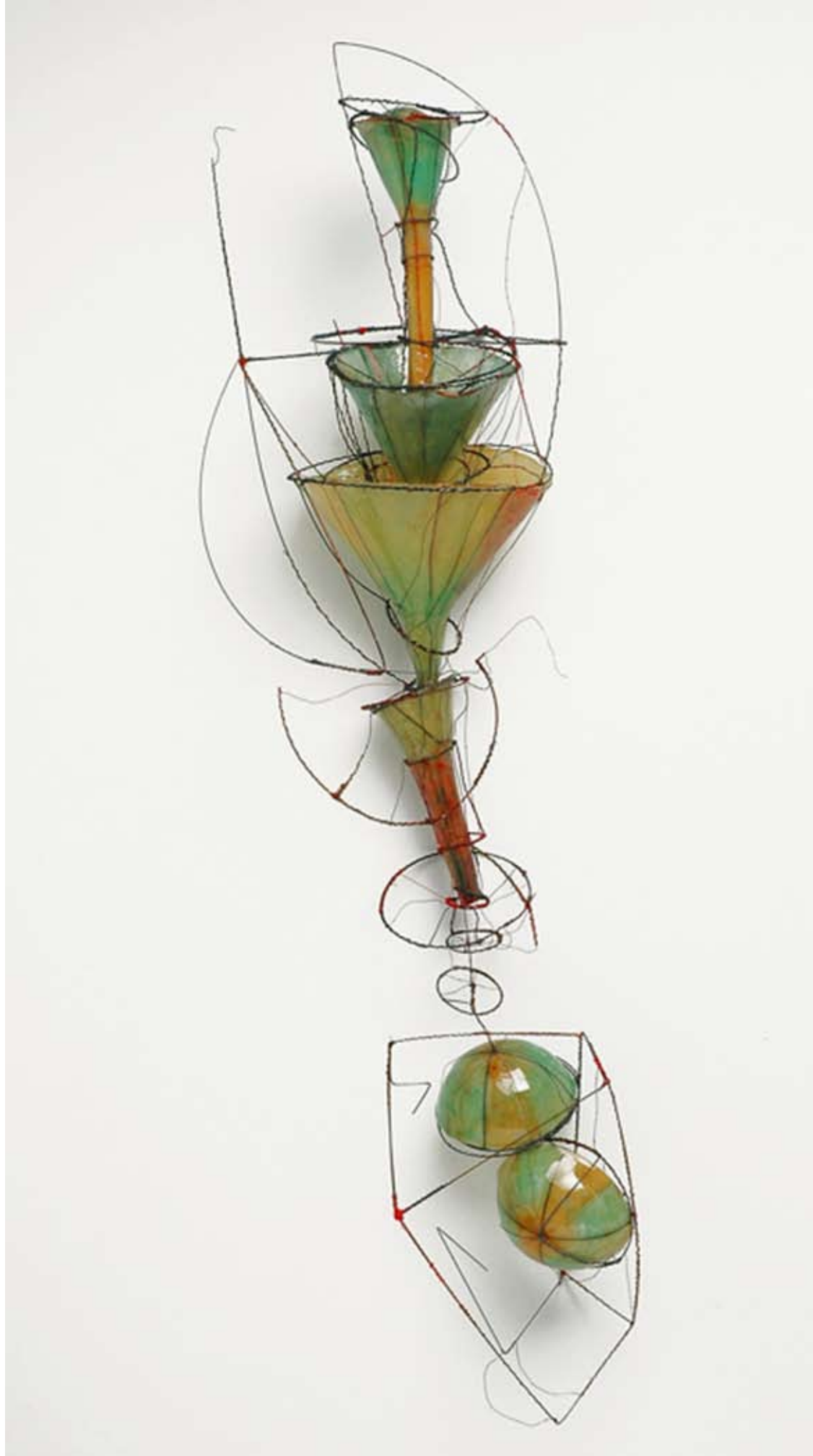
Among Ewen’s most famous series is Pipeline Dreams. (She’s got a knack for clever titles.) These sculptural installations are funnel-shaped latex cast-

ings that are then coated in resin. The latex is pigmented, resulting in bursts of burnt orange, bright robin’s egg blue and pale, delicate greens. Colored wires not only string the pieces together, but also take the latex castings to a greater three-dimensional level: in Pipeline Dreams, the wires help to represent the flow of the Alaskan pipeline. Behind them, wall text references the effects of oil on the area’s wildlife, as well as the politics of drilling.

“Pipeline Dreams was political...but I didn’t want to do it in a heavy way,” says Ewen.

Indeed, another common thread in Ewen’s work is a subtle, dry humor laced with commentary on politics, society and particularly, nature. But at the same time, Ewen is the first to admit that she







doesn't take herself – or her art -- too seriously. Whether it's a lighthearted pun on the title of the piece, a splash of unexpected color, or a clever double entendre, Ewen's pieces are never without a bit of humor.

"There's a wit to my work," she admits with a smile. "A pointed wit."

From Pipeline Dreams Ewen drew a lot of inspiration in subsequent projects, such as Turbulent (e) Motion, in which she combined castings of laboratory equipment in latex, sketches and scientific equations and texts to examine the relationship between physics and personal expression.

"I was reading physics books – old ones – and I felt they were speaking to the body," Ewen says.

Ewen has also collaborated with several other artists over the years, including Cuban artist Janette Brossard on her series Azul y Blue and Las Botellas de Agua as well as with local writer Denise Bergman when the two bridged the gap between visual art and poetry in The Space Between.

"What I like about collaborating is that I suspend my ego about my work," says Ewen.

From her sculptural installations, Ewen progressed into a new series of sculptural drawings, Global Currents. These pieces consist of a collage of maps, graph paper, wire and occasionally text, and focus primarily on the politics and issues that surround water.

"Inspiration comes when you're working and not when you're not," she says with a smile.

Water has long been a source of inspiration for Ewen, and for her, these series often feel like a natural progression, particularly because, in a way, they happened by accident.

"I was asked to be in a show about water on the Cape. They were going to be shown in two locations, so I couldn't attach them to the wall, like some of my installations," says Ewen of her inspiration for these 3 dimensional map-like structural drawings. "In this journal translated into Spanish, there was an article by an American, Donald Worcester, and it was amazing. It looked at the control of water. So, I combined articles about dams, and that kind of centralized control of the land through water, and cast printed maps, used meteorological books for maps of water currents, and weather graph paper."

From there, the project took off, and the sculptural drawings continue to evolve to this day. She has created a huge four-part piece on the Amazon river, another on oil spills, water control in Iraq, and others on drought and other water-related issues.

Ewen's most current works are smaller versions that incorporate puzzle pieces into the process. The 3-D map-like pieces are exquisite, delicate sculptural drawings in vibrant blues, and their attention to detail leaves the viewer in a tug of war between an aesthetic appreciation and an intellectual challenge.

Before I leave, I attempt to ask Ms. Ewen some lofty questions about life, the meaning of art, and her choice to be an artist. She laughs me off for the most part, but pauses at my last question:

"If I could choose, I might be something else," she says, "But it's not a choice."

Contact:

phyllise@phyllisewen.com
www.phyllisewen.com