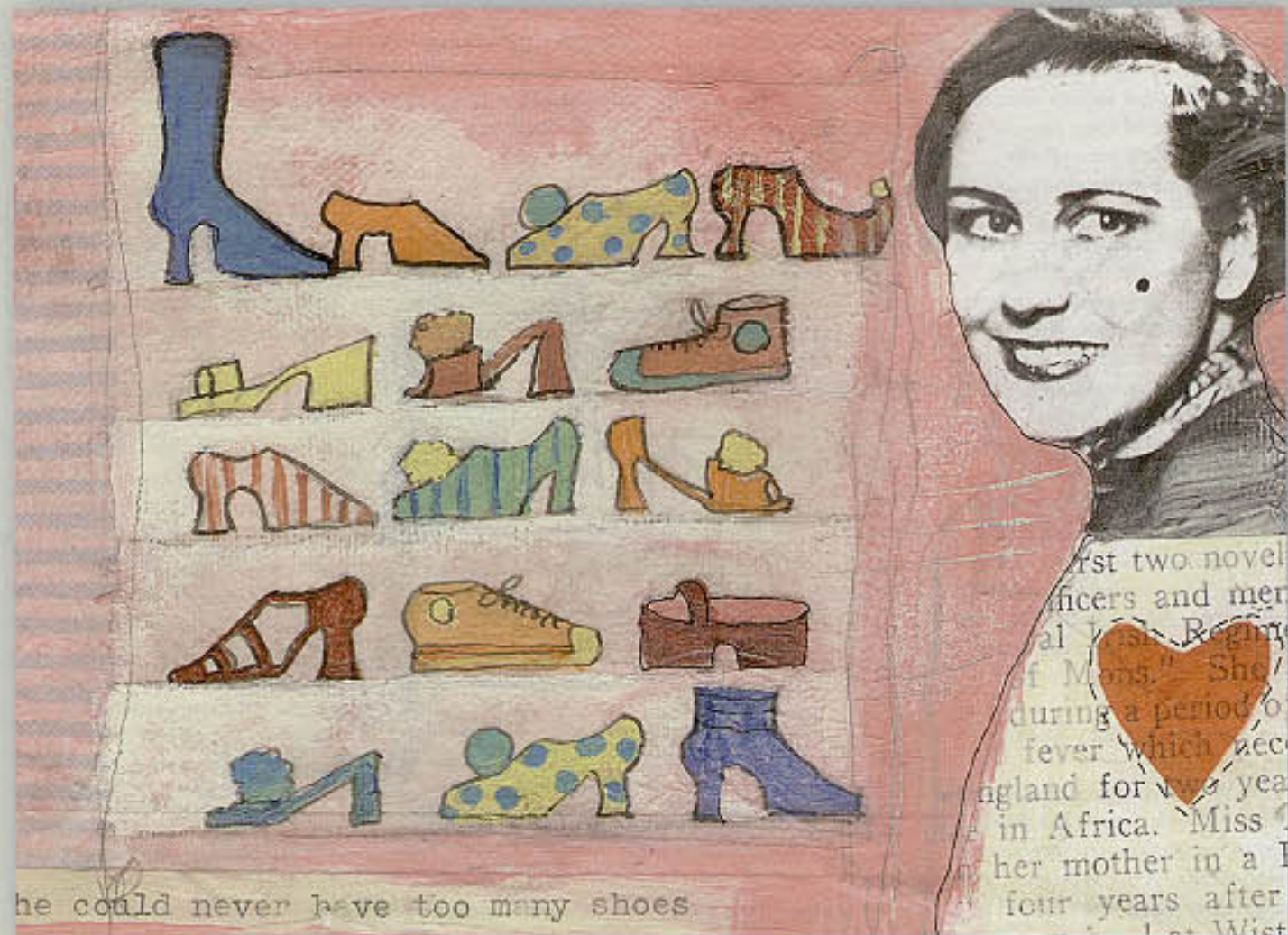


The Laughter and Whimsy of the Poppets

Claudine Hellmuth's New Collage Series



by Jenny Doh

When it comes to mixed-media collage art, Claudine Hellmuth is most definitely a household name. For almost seven years, Claudine has delighted us with artwork, rubber stamps, workshops and most recently a book titled *Collage Discovery Workshop*, that are distinctly romantic and nostalgic in style.

However, since June 2003, Claudine has departed from her style by creating a new collage series called the *Poppets*. The *Poppets* series is a shift from the serious and romantic to the

whimsy and frolicsome style that Claudine is currently attracted to — both in her artwork and her day-to-day life. She says that the signal to change her work was "the realization that I was stuck in a rut. I had become very familiar with my artistic patterns and working in the way that I had been for some time. It took me almost a full year to arrive at the *Poppets*."

Claudine started her year-long journey by making a list of the types of artwork that she enjoyed — not as a creator but as an observer. After making this list, she concluded that the five

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elements she wanted to pursue for her own future creations included texture, line, whimsy, bright colors, and drawing. Claudine and I recently spent some time discussing her fascinating journey of discovering the *Poppets*.

SS: Have you 're-invented' yourself by taking this new stylistic turn?

CH: I guess so. It's a refreshing change of pace. I even find this new whimsical way of looking at things seeping into my 'regular' life. I've wanted to wear more colorful clothes and decorate my house with more color.

SS: Are you surprised with this turn of artistic direction?

CH: Not really ... when I look back at my artwork, it seems about every five years or so my well runs dry and it's time to try something new. When I was in college I painted large abstract paintings ... I loved working that way and at the time I thought I'd paint like that forever. Over time, I got used to creating at that level and I found I was repeating myself again and again — so I knew it was time for a change. That's when I started doing collage.

SS: Do you foresee yourself staying in whimsy for the time being or returning to your previous style or going somewhere completely different from here?

CH: I see myself working in this vein for as long as I need to. I'll keep at it until I feel I have explored all the aspects of it. Then I'll know it's time for a change. I'll have to wait and see what will come after that. I feel like as an artist, that I have to keep moving forward and trying new things, discovering and expressing what's most important to me at the time.

SS: How did the title *Poppets* get created?

CH: My grandma used that word as a term of endearment. She would say to me 'don't worry little poppet everything is going to be okay.' And since these pieces make me feel good, safe and young — the name fits perfectly.

SS: Who are the people depicted in the *Poppets*?

CH: Most of the *Poppet* people aren't people that I know. They are from various photos and images that I have culled over the years ... sometimes I work with images of people that I do know. I have been doing quite a few *Poppet* commissions where I work from someone's photo and create a collage using their image. I have a lot of fun working on those!

SS: What is to be learned about an artist who can generate very diverse styles of work?

CH: Some artists work in many styles during their lives. Think of Picasso with his blue period, red period, cubist work ... amazing

that all this work comes from the same person! I think that what is to be learned is that there are many aspects to you as an artist, explore all of them, see where all the directions take you.

SS: Why are people drawn to whimsy?

CH: People's lives are very stressful now, with busy jobs and family demands. I think that many people like to have things around them that make them laugh and remind them to have to fun.

SS: How long have you been creating the *Poppet* series?

CH: I started working in a direction that would lead me to the *Poppets* in June of 2003. I had been experimenting with different ways of working for about a year before that. One night, I was going through my closet and dug out a few of my sketchbooks from 1993. In these sketchbooks were drawings of women dancing and in funny poses. They were really whimsical and light. I suddenly thought 'Ah ha! Yes! This is the way I need to go!'

I began by using only copy paper, crayons, glue stick and ball point pen ... I wanted to create a lot of drawings quickly so that I could force myself to expand and try and see where the direction was going.

After a couple months of playing around, I decided to show some of my drawings to a few artist friends. I got good feedback and I felt like my instincts were confirmed that this was the way to go. Then I experimented more by playing with color and themes and bringing the collages onto canvas ... I still feel like I am still expanding on what the *Poppets* will become — to me it's only the beginning. I have been playing with fabric and stitching, so who knows what will come next?

SS: If an observer were to see one of your earlier collage pieces and

one of your *Poppets*, could the observer find a common thread to

clue her into the fact that one artist created both?

CH: I think that while the works do look very different there are some similarities. My compositional structures are still very alike. Also the painterly backgrounds and brushstroke is the same even from my very early work until now. If you line up all my work even from the past 15 years you can tell it's all done by me, it's just different aspects of the same artist.

SS: You say that you wanted to bring laughter back into your work and life. What made laughter go away from your work and life in the past?

CH: I think the excitement went away from my artwork because I was stuck in a rut. I knew I was in a rut but I was afraid to change. I was scared that people might not like my new work



because it wasn't what was expected of me. All the joy had gone out of my usual way of working and I knew I needed change. I was floundering around trying to find my way.

SS: Have the *Poppets* brought laughter back into your life?

CH: Once I gave myself permission to try and grow, I felt so much better. I felt like a weight had been lifted! After I found my way to the whimsical *Poppets*, I began giggling and talking while I was working. I was having fun again and enjoying the process of creation. I no longer had to drag myself into my studio. When I couldn't wait to get there — that's when I knew I was on the right track again.

Claudine Hellmuth is currently working on a second book with North Light — to be released in the summer of 2005. An instructional DVD is in production — to be released in the fall of 2004.

