

Written By **NANCY BARNES**

Photographed By **LAURIE GABOARDI**

Artist Nancy Lasar is stepping out. The Washington resident, whose calligraphic, gestural works have established her as a presence at exhibitions in the Northeast, will participate this year for the first time in the annual nonmember invitational exhibition at the National Academy Museum in New York. The exhibition in the museum's elegant Beaux-Arts townhouse on Upper Fifth Avenue will include her large soft ground and aquatint print, "After Midnight with VanDyke" (2007).

Recently, inside her two-story West Wind Studio close to Washington Depot, where she has part of her working space, lines of a sharp orange-red and also a soft yellow appeared across some of the dark blue-gray and brown grounds on small collages created from cloth and torn prints on one tabletop. Another table held a sheaf of Mrs. Lasar's good-sized etchings, impeccably printed on large, white Arches stock by VanDeb Editions in New York. A wall supported a number of her paintings, works that are less linear in style than her prints, in colors that consisted primarily of pastel shades and what seems her signature bright, orange-red color.

"I'm resolving," observed the diminutive Mrs. Lasar, whose nonrepresentational prints frequently hint at a highly exoticized plant life, as she stood in front of one table.

"I seem to have art strewn everywhere," she affirmed several days later. "I seem to get to a place where I'm stumped or stopped . . . The work is just so interrelated. Old prints become collaged into my paperwork," said the artist who has hewn to two-dimensional art in forms as various as collage, printmaking, painting and drawing throughout her professional life. She thought back to periods when, raising her family, working full-time and, at one point, serving as a caregiver, she only had had time to draw. "As I enter my 60s, I'm really able to be a full-time artist in a way that I never was [before]. . . I'm resolving some of the unfinished pieces or bringing them all together."

"I have a lot of unfinished work I'm

constantly trying to resolve," she continued. "I may have 20 or 30 things unresolved. I can't take one piece and go from start to finish. Everything is layered up. The exception would be the things that go through the press," she said, referring to a press once owned by Greenwich-based artist Robert Motherwell that now sits in a second work space she has in New Milford. "Even then I connect lines . . . I spend a lot of time resolving. 'Completing' would be the word."

At the invitational exhibition at the National Academy, Mrs. Lasar and Litchfield County artists Elizabeth MacDonald and Bryan Nash Gill will find themselves among 125 contemporary artists from across the country. The group is expected to include the Cuban-Americans José Bedia and Maria Elena González, the New York stalwart Jim Wines and West Hartford artist Eve Olitski, whose luminous acrylic-on-canvas entitled "Warm Enfold" embraces a color-field style similar to that practiced at one time by her father, the abstract artist Jules Olitski (1922-2007).

With National Academicians as diverse as the 19th-century Hudson River School artist Frederic Edwin Church and the contemporary sculptor Louise Bourgeois, the museum and art school views its invitational exhibition as a chance for the public to see what it terms new directions in American art. A panel of seven academicians chooses the artists from more than 400 who were recommended for consideration. In Mrs. Lasar's case, that recommendation came from Washington sculptor Philip Grausman, who, along with artist Charles Cajori, Mrs. Lasar views as among those who have influenced her work.

"You select the slides, and they select the piece," Mrs. Lasar said of the process in New York.

"Her use of line has always been there as an important ingredient," said Mr. Cajori, speaking from his Watertown home. Mr. Cajori said he had bought one of Mrs. Lasar's prints a number of years ago. "She may be less concerned with description. I think that, generally, in the [art] with the line, there's been a loosening of being descriptive," he said of the evolution of Mrs.

Lasar's work over time. "It's become much freer, more abstract."

Born in New Hampshire, Mrs. Lasar grew up in Massachusetts, and she described herself as a person who always painted and drew.

"I got to do murals in the third grade," she said, terming her later undergraduate work at the Rhode Island School of Design a fluke. She said a friend of her mother's told her about a school where an applicant could go and take a drawing test. "I took the drawing test, and I got in," she said, noting that she had just gone to the school on a train. "I didn't have a portfolio or anything."

While in Providence, R.I., she also learned about art by living behind the celebrated photographer Harry Callahan (1912-1999), whom she would see working outside. "It wasn't just his dedication and pure sense of being," she said of what she sensed in him. "It was just the way that he lived," she said. "You lived modestly. You just did it every day."

The everydayness of drawing stayed with Mrs. Lasar as she and her husband, Stephen Lasar, first lived in New York City. There, Mr. Lasar took his architecture degree, before the couple moved to Connecticut in the early 1970s, with Mrs. Lasar completing additional study in art at Columbia University, the Yale University Graduate School of Fine Art and, more recently, at the Vermont Studio Center. A person can draw in an hour here or an hour there, she said. While raising a family and working full-time in Connecticut, she began to develop skills in monoprinting because she realized it was work she could do in a day.

"It's a function of having to find solutions that were fast, that would save time, that would propel me forward in a faster way. It forces you to work fast," she said of monoprinting, which produces single works rather than prints in an edition.

"From the very beginning, my work has been 'line.' People use words like 'condensed energy' and 'flow,'" she said of an element of her work Mr. Cajori once described in an exhibition catalogue as sinuous and elegant. "I think the line is a function of describing a transitional state, so you can go into he

interconnectedness of form. We realize now everything is connected. Lines help describe that sense of things moving forward but also being connected.

"That's why I use things like the skull," she said of her continued interest in drawing that includes renderings of a ram's skull. With two large curvilinear horns, it sits on the top of a table in a room in her Washington work space. Her second space, where her printing press resides, is up a country road in New Milford. "We draw from the model," she continued. "It helps you to focus on space and depth."

"It's become much more open and fluid," she replied when asked how her work has evolved over the years. She described her evolution as keeping things lighter and more airy. "That comes from confidence and knowing what you're after."

She terms her husband, who continues to practice architecture in New Milford, as her greatest promoter, and she sees a connection between her work and his.

"He's a genius at interior light and space. The movement of light and just that open airiness. All his forms—he creates a wonderful sense of flow between spaces. There's a fluid airy openness in the way space is created that's also characteristic of mine. . . He's a great sounding board," she said.

"The area's just rich in artists," she said of working in Litchfield County, broadly. She cited her affinity with Mr. Grausman, who, like herself, has worked in graphite, and also Mr. Cajori, whose graphite and charcoal drawings she termed stunning.

Being in that community, you have a great deal of support, Mrs. Lasar said.

In what seems a full exhibition season, she is exhibiting "Transmutation Series: Airbourne #1" at the 59th Annual Art of the Northeast exhibition at the Silvermine Guild Arts Center in New Canaan until June 6. The 183rd Annual Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary American Art at the National Academy Museum in New York will open May 29 and extend to Sept. 7. For more information on the exhibits, see the Web sites [www.silvermineart.org](http://www.silvermineart.org) and [www.nationalacademy.org](http://www.nationalacademy.org).



Left, Nancy Lasar in her New Milford work space with a press that formerly belonged to artist Robert Motherwell. Center, an untitled acrylic on canvas by Mrs. Lasar. Far left, some of her supplies and a ram's skull she uses as a model.