

# CONSUMED: Hidden Connections

Eileen Tognini pulls unlike artifacts into arrangements that inspire larger endeavors.

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FOR THE INQUIRER

Independent curator Eileen Tognini conjures up the site-specific works at Fishtown's massive Skybox Gallery. So far, she and her artists have filled the turn-of-the-century industrial space with installations made of hand-charred tree limbs, recycled water bottles, and gigantic balloon sculptures. "The shows have been about taking a simple material and reimagining it," she says.

Tognini also chairs Collab, the committee that drives the Philadelphia Museum of Art's modern-design initiatives. Her studio overlooking the SkyBox reflects her life in design and art. Many of the pieces — a table made from reclaimed pallets by University of the Arts grad Anthony Angelicola; two chandeliers by Old City designer Michael Biello — are design-art, or functional objects that are handcrafted rather than mass-produced.

The space is also punctuated by curious groupings of objects, or what Tognini calls "curated corners." In one such corner, two cast-iron pulleys are placed in a well-considered triangle with a pair of antique Chinese slippers and two elaborately bound design books. Day to day, Tognini exercises her curatorial eye by teasing out connections between these seemingly unlike things.

**Consumed with:** Collections of objects. "I'm smitten by relationships," she says. "It's about the juxtapositions." Specifically, she's inspired right

now by the dialogue between the following: a pair of cast-iron tailor's scissors, a ceramic hand form, an antique letter bought at an Aix-en-Provence flea market, a charred root from the most recent Skybox installation, and a single porcelain walnut in a bowl full of real nuts.

**Common thread:** "They're all sculptural, beautiful objects," she says. "Together, they're where trade, craft, art, and the natural world intersect." She bought the heavy, cast-iron scissors from a Jamaican man at a Poconos flea market. They were custom-made for his mother, a tailor. The walnut is from an Art Star craft bazaar. "I'm not a collector of any one thing," she says, "but I've picked these pieces up along the way, and they inspire me."

**Rare materials:** Through a curtain of silver beads at one end of the studio is Tognini's inspiration board. It currently holds a piece of scrap-yard-sourced steel twisted into a scribble; an art-deco-style label from a tin of absinthe pastilles; a square of cardboard dotted with brass tacks; and an unopened package of novelty erasers. "It's just a lot of little relationships that are often the genesis of other things," she says. These little relationships inform her design choices in the gallery.

**Barnes raising:** Pursuing a three-year horticulture course at the Barnes Foundation almost a decade ago, Tognini saw a direct relationship between Laura Barnes' outdoor plantings and



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SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL / Staff Photographer

the art her husband hung inside the galleries. "The colors you saw from inside the gallery were complementary to the artwork,"

says Tognini. "Even the bark and textures were taken into account." The program made her aware of what she does

intuitively. "It made me more conscientious about how I could help others see things differently."