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## Totes hold their own as art

By Lindsay J. Warner

For The Inquirer

The routine used to be mindless - "Paper or plastic?" - as much a part of the shopping ritual as endless check-out lines and squeaky grocery carts.

Now you're more likely to hear "Did you bring your own bag?", often prompting an embarrassed look and a mumbled, "Must've left it in the car."

While shoppers are queried by cashiers and City Council hashes out a possible plastic-bag ban, one group is poised to capitalize on the public's growing conscience - reusable bag makers.

As more stores follow trendy Whole Foods and Trader Joe's to become advocates and retailers of their own brand-stamped reusable bag, artists have kept pace, churning out brightly colored, funky totes - and not just for earnest college students or environmental advocates like longtime Sierra Club member Dennis Winters. (He cherishes a well-worn cloth tote from the very first Earth Day in 1970.)

The green scheme runs the gamut: from totes with bold anti-war graphics, to silkscreened cartoon characters making snarky comments about materialism, to brightly colored bags with geometric graphics and vintage details.

Some bag makers, such as Lindsay Duggan, 26, owner of the newly opened Girl.Bike.Dog on 23d and Bainbridge Street, incorporate additional features, such as a padded shoulder and sternum strap influenced by her popular, custom-made bike messenger bags.

Others, like South Philly-based Sara Selepouchin, rely on a standard tote-bag pattern embellished with whimsical details. Selepouchin, 26, trained as an architect, covers her bags with precisely labeled diagrams of bikes, cameras, coffeemakers and other products.

Selepouchin is one of several local artists whose work is featured at Mew Gallery on Ninth and Christian, an art gallery/retail shop/artists' co-op. Co-owners Lauren Parker and Carolynne McNeel, who left the fashion industry to start the business in 2006, sell work by mostly local artists producing environmentally friendly products. Reusable tote bags fit nicely into that spectrum.

"Certainly, people buy totes because they're cute - bright graphics like owls and skulls never really go out of fashion," Parker, 31, said. But whether customers do it for the environment's sake or to be trendy, Parker is seeing more people using cloth bags. When the store opened three years ago, it featured two artists selling bags; now it sells between eight and 10.

The trend has trickled down to the grassroots as well, as many first-time crafters learning how to sew colored handmade grocery bags as a first project. Spool Sewing, 1912 South St., which opened last year,

offers a basic two-session "Learn to Sew" class - its most popular - where the final product is a tote bag and the classes fill fast. With August already full, sign-up is underway for September ([www.spoolsewing.com](http://www.spoolsewing.com), 215-545-0755).

The tote-bag culture owes much of its popularity to good design. But because \$1 grocery bags at Whole Foods and Trader Joe's also are considered cool in a retro, low-cost way, artists are pushed to come up with concepts that will attract consumers despite a \$12 to \$30 price tag.

Melinda Steffy, 28, a local mixed-media artist, responded to the stiff competition by turning to the produce aisle. Her reusable mesh produce bags, designed to replace the flimsy plastic bags available in the fruit and vegetable section, are strictly business - and endlessly useful. Made of heavy starched tulle similar to the netting of a ballet dancer's tutu, her bags are fully functional and strong enough to hold heavy produce like apples and oranges, yet their see-through quality enables cashiers to easily scan the fruits' produce numbers.

"It took some trial and error, but I thought it seemed important to find a way to get rid of the unnecessary use of plastic," she said. "The produce bags evolved as an answer to the question I was asking myself, which was why, when I purposefully go to the local farmers' market, am I putting this beautiful, locally grown produce in plastic bags?"

Steffy says she often is approached about her bags while shopping, and believes there's a place for wholesale partnerships between artists and farmers' markets or small, locally owned grocery stores. Still, she is hesitant to embark on such an ambitious project.

"I make produce bags to support my studio-art process, and to buy art supplies," she said.

Even if local tote makers have yet to capitalize on the direct artist-to-market relationship, stores like Whole Foods have expressed interest. A craft fair held the last Saturday of the month from 12 to 3 p.m. outside the Callowhill and South Street stores offers free booth space to any local vendor who meets quality standards.

"We had artists express a lot of interest when we opened up our weekly farmers' market last summer, so we decided to launch a craft fair in response," said Amy Chidichimo, Whole Foods marketing specialist and community liaison.

"It's a great way for artists to get noticed, and if we like their products, we're also interested in selling them inside the store year-round," Chidichimo said. "That includes tote bags too - even though we sell our own, we're always very interested in the local angle."

Although Councilmen Frank DiCicco and James Kenney's proposed plastic-bag ban for Philadelphia was voted down 10-6 last month, DiCicco is expected to reintroduce another bill in the fall.

So maybe it's only a matter of time before "paper or plastic?" will be a thing of the past.

Polka dots or plain canvas, anyone? And you'd better remember to bring it with you every time.

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