

The Vindicator

By Guy D'Astolfo

With its pre-fabricated cabinetry, Youngstown Steel Kitchens ushered in the era of the modern “installed” kitchen.

Made in the 1950s by Mullins Manufacturing Corp. of Warren, a subsidiary of Sharon Steel, the product line was touted in post-war advertising as an appurtenance of domestic bliss for American housewives.

The smooth metal has long since been replaced by wooden cabinetry in kitchens across the country.

But the era of the Youngstown Steel Kitchen remains a telling snapshot of the nation in the post-War decade. It was a time of suburbanization when the traditional family was awkwardly melded with modernity.

Jennifer Vanderpool takes a sly poke at this time in her art installation “Hometown Story: Youngstown Steel Kitchens,” which opens Sunday at the Butler Institute of American Art.

On a local level, the installation has another facet. It also alludes to the seldom-seen domestic end of the Mahoning Valley’s macho culture of steel.

Vanderpool, a Cortland native and 1989 graduate of Lakeview High School, is an artist whose work has been exhibited at museums and galleries across the world.

She created “Youngstown Steel Kitchens” as a site-specific installation exclusively for the Butler.

The exhibit, which occupies an entire gallery, consists of an actual model of a Youngstown Steel Kitchen, as well as examples of advertising and marketing materials — some of it altered by the artist — for the product line.

The result is a Warholian piece of pop art, a sly spoof that pokes at society then and now.

“It’s based on history and on the artist’s perception of history,” said Kathy Earnhart, spokeswoman for the museum.

Vanderpool is a “soft-spoken rebel who gracefully inhabits the frontlines of identity politics,” according to the artist’s biography on her website. “Her working process often explores her heartland roots where she was raised to be a gritty domestic goddess. She now employs her shopping skills to create multifaceted and

sometimes-meandering installations that comment on domesticity, constructed environments, and pop culture.”

According to the biography, Vanderpool maintains contradictions in her work, which is often both tongue-in-cheek and deadly serious.

She deconstructs through her art the appeal of mass-produced consumer goods, especially artificial confectionery foods and plastics.

Vanderpool has exhibited at museums and galleries in the United States, Mexico, Colombia, Hungary, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. She has been awarded grants from the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, Danish Arts Council and Swedish Arts Council, and also received project funding from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. She was the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Challenge America Grant for her community intervention work.

Vanderpool holds a doctorate in art critical practices from the University of California Regents, and a master’s degree from the University of California-Santa Barbara.