



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Nicoletta Barolini in her workshop.

## Exhibit highlights artist's 'flat' dimensions

By Ann van Buren

The walls of the Esther Raushenbush Library at Sarah Lawrence College are not exactly silent. Larger-than-life-sized cutouts of sprawling figures painted with acrylic on wood reach out to visitors while contorted clay figures trapped behind plexiglass tumble through space in another colorful assemblage.

These pieces are part of "Flatlands," an exhibit of artwork by Nicoletta Barolini, a 1983 graduate of the college and Hastings resident for the past 21 years. Barolini developed the theme of the show after learning that the gallery had space for only one podium, and therefore the sculpture had to be flat.

"I felt very flat after that," she said, but began to work with the idea.

At the time, Barolini was, coincidentally, reading "Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions," written by Edwin A. Abbott in the late 19th century. Abbot's novel is a social commentary on the limits imposed by the hierarchical nature of society. Barolini took the concept from the page to her art, in which she depicts the "flatness" of today's workaday world where people's lives are flattened or homogenized. Her pieces allude to days spent in front of a computer screen or strapped behind a car's steering wheel, as in "Flat Navigation," which depicts drivers going every which way, with dull looks in their eyes.

"Most people only see in one dimension," said Barolini.

In the book, a square that exists in a one-dimensional world begins to literally "think outside of the box," said the artist, as she walked between her sculptures. "As the book progresses, the square finds out that there are more dimensions — not just three, but four, five, six, seven dimensions," she explained. The point, she continued, is that "There really aren't limits; the limits are imposed on your thinking and they're reinforced in social and cultural ways."

It's easy to imagine why the 49-year-old artist thinks this way, as her life has been anything but conventional. Born in Tarrytown to Helen Barolini, the author and expert on the Italian-American experience, and Antonio Barolini, an Italian journalist for the newspa-

per La Stampa until his untimely death when Nicoletta was 9, she became aware of multiple worlds as she was immersed in international experiences from birth.

"I went to nine schools in 12 years," said Barolini. "As a child I went to French school, British school, Catholic school and Italian public school, all in Italy," before eventually ended up at Ossining High School.

While attending Sarah Lawrence, Barolini participated in the college's study abroad program that took her to Lacoste, France, where she studied sculpture in a limestone quarry. She also studied painting, casting, and metalwork at the Tyler School of Art in Rome.

"Sarah Lawrence is great because you're really protected on an island. This is where I got into art big time. I had room to experiment and make messes; I had wonderful teachers," she said.

The graphic designer for The Record, a publication of Columbia University's Office of Public Affairs, Barolini still has the creative energy to continue her own work in her home studio in Hastings even as she shares a life with Tom, the father of her two children — Antonia Barolini, 17, a senior at Hastings High School, and Darla Barolini, a Hastings graduate and sophomore at Manhattanville College who recently won a Gilman Award that she will use to study painting in Rome. Nicoletta's mother, Helen, also lives in Hastings.

Although the artist has chosen to stay local, she believes that it's possible to be attuned to the different dimensions of life and culture wherever you are.

She went on to talk about watching a movie, "A State of Mind," by writer-producer Dan Gordon. The film is about life in North Korea, and conveys the message that children, unaware of any other way of life, are raised with a kind of discipline that is unheard of in the U.S. Barolini was fascinated by that, but suggested that even here, with all of the media outlets, people are the products of very set ways of thinking — more so than they might realize. This is the result of mass media, she said, but also the result of parenting styles and the education system.

"I think of children who are so sincere when they're little, sincere about their emotions and everything. Parenting can be very flattening. The more flattening they get as children, the more they burst at the seams as teens," she said.

"Our work in our society is very regimented and flat," she continued. "We seem to invest in things and ideas, but we don't invest enough in people, the ones who are making the things and ideas."

She added that it is not just in the work environment, but at school that this happens, pointing to the one sculpture that is on the podium, which she calls "Flat Making Machine." Made of wood, wire, metal and sand, she described the idea behind its form. "You start off as a fully formed person and you come out flat. It's a system," she said. "These systems tend to flatten people into what the machine needs." The sculpture consists of two end supports that hold up parallel metal bars. Suspended in the middle is a line of sculpted figures, the first of which is a fully formed, voluptuously shaped body. The next figure in the line is a little less shapely, as is the next. The shape at the opposite end of the parallel bars appears to be virtually one-dimensional.

Upon explaining the concept behind that work, she turned back to the work on the walls, which had to be flattened — much like most individuals — in one way or another. Disappointing as that may sound, the exhibit is anything but. "The sculptures themselves are flat, but very colorful, swirly shaped. The point is that, no matter how hard you try, you can never make human beings flat," she concluded, sounding noticeably uncynical. The very act of thinking about this might well be what makes her assertion true.

"Flatlands" is on view at the Esther Raushenbush Library of Sarah Lawrence College, 1 Mead Way, Bronxville, through Dec. 16. For hours and other information call (914) 395-2474.