

# Manhole Magic

Sewer Covers Double As Temporary Art In Downtown NL

By **RICK KOSTER**

*Features*

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## New London

IN THE INNER-URBAN landscape here, where sidewalk pedestrians are typically treated to vistas of cigarette butts, windblown fast-food sacks and all-purpose filth, iridescently-hued manhole covers are popping up across the downtown.

On State Street just down from the Garde Arts Center, between Hanafin's Pub and the Dew Art Gallery, and again between the SBC Service Center and the Honey Plus convenience store, covers have turned up decorated in day-glo fashion.

Until recently, the identity of the artist was a mystery. No more, though.

"Yeah, it's me," said George Clarke, a local insurance salesman and peace activist who also publishes a local periodical called River Edge Record. Clarke also drives the rather notorious "Varuna Van" around town, which is painted in the abstract neon many associate with the Partridge Family bus. "I've wanted to do the manhole covers for years. I've always thought they were ideal for artwork, and I like artwork on things that aren't flat."

Clarke isn't defacing municipal property with paint, though.

He utilizes colored sand — the sort found in certain Navajo or monk sand paintings — that he carefully distributes in a variety of patterns within the tiny and scalloped grid work atop the covers.

Clarke said he usually does the work at night and drives or walks around until he finds a cover that he likes. He has bags of colored sand in his van, and over time has refined the process and technique.

"Part of the fun is that the wind might blow the sand and alter the work, or someone might kick it, and that's OK, too," Clarke said. "I like the impermanence of the idea."

The idea that his work might be illegal

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**Brenda De Los Santos**

*The manhole cover between Hanifan's Pub and Dew Art on State Street in downtown New London on Friday, August 26, 2005. An anonymous local resident has recently been "painting" manhole covers with colored sand in the dead of night.*



**Brenda De Los Santos**

*The manhole cover on the corner of State Street and Bank Street in downtown New London on Friday, August 26, 2005. An anonymous local resident has recently been "painting" manhole covers with colored sand in the dead of night.*

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The idea that his work might be illegal didn't really occur to him, he said, adding that more than once police have seen him in the process and didn't seem overly perturbed.

"They smile or laugh at me," Clarke said. "It's not like it's paint. It's colored sand, so it can be blown away in the breeze or vacuumed up, for that matter."

By certain municipal definitions, what Clarke is doing could be construed as littering, said Ed Steward, director of public works. "If it's not part of a city-sponsored program, yes, it could be considered littering. It doesn't matter whether it's colored sand or not, the technical way to look at it is that someone's got to clean it up."

But Steward allowed that it wouldn't constitute a massive priority, either. "If it doesn't interfere with anybody, we're probably not going to do anything about it." He laughed. "People would probably think we were against the arts."

Clarke has done several smaller covers and estimates five or six of the larger ones, and says they're all over the downtown area. Of late, he's incorporated helpers and, in the fashion of folk art, started to utilize found objects from the street such as flattened bottle caps.

"The process is always changing and I'm learning as I go," he said. "There's no particular reason for it. I just like doing it and seeing how they change with the wind or whatever. I can't wait for the first rainstorm."

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