

In 2004, she began making her signature piece and most successful craft project: the messenger owl.

The hand-cut and machine-sewn plush owl with a card in the back pocket was featured in HGTV's "That's Clever," and became so popular that Levine couldn't keep up with demand. In December 2004, she hired a former co-worker, Kimberly Kisiolek, to help her make them.

It resulted in a relationship so successful that by June 2005, they decided to open Paper Boat Boutique and Gallery together in Bay View. The idea for the boutique came about, Levine explained, because Milwaukee didn't have a boutique with exclusively independently produced goods. Two-hundred-fifty artists supply the store's wares.

Although it's debt-free, Paper Boat is a labor of love. "Making the decision to shop independent, hand-made and local makes a bigger impact (on artists) than people realize," Levine said.

Step 6

Surround yourself with supportive and talented loved ones.

Kisiolek is one of Levine's sources of support. Lilley is another; he helps man the store when she is too busy. Clearly, Levine's work has inspired many other artists.

"Faythe has clearly demonstrated that this city will support something that's more than a little different and undefinable, which encourages me to push Cedar Block toward more oddball events and projects," Gohde said. "She's not just a designer or a filmmaker or a musician or a business owner or a curator . . . she's all of these things, and she excels at each of them."

Step 7

Just do it, or someone else will.

"Productivity and self-motivation isn't something that's learned at school," Levine said. "If you want to get stuff done, you just do it." That's how "Handmade Nation" was born.

"I never thought about making a film," Levine said. "But I knew that if I didn't do it, someone else was going to do it wrong." Last



Bar soaps (left) and square pins from Paper Boat Boutique and Gallery.

MKE FILE PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER O. BLUHM

year, she asked her best friend, filmmaker Micaela O'Herlihy, to spend a year shooting the film.

"The film comes directly out of my respect for all these people that I've crossed paths with in the last five years. And I wanted to make sure they were represented in a good light," she said.

Levine is whittling down almost 80 hours of footage into an overview of the indie craft community. "The overall tone of the film isn't determined yet," she said with a grin. "But you really can't go wrong with 50-plus interviews of really interesting people, 90 percent of them cute girls who make incredible art!"

Step 8

Just do it. (part two)

Levine's musical instrument of choice again lends to her DIY aesthetic. She taught herself to play the saw — played on the flat edge, not the serrated edge — with a violin bow six years ago by practicing along to classical music. Then she decided to make music with Wooden Robot's rotating cast. Past gigs included playing at the Pabst Theater lobby to opening for David Byrne, among others.

"Our sound is pretty obscure. Our influences (range from) gypsy music to punk music," she said.

Step 9

See yourself in context.

To Levine, one of the most important things about the resurgence of craft is the fact that people are making things with their hands. "Whether or not they're good at it, it's healthy to

make stuff," she said.

But Matthew Stinchcomb, Etsy.com's vice president for publicity, credits the booming trend of indie craft to the backlash against mass-produced, chain store consumerism. Independent makers can create a "counter economy" by allowing people to consume goods outside the mall and Wal-Mart.

That crafting is now getting mainstream attention owes a lot to people like Levine. "People are more inspired by what others are making and think, 'I could be making that (myself),' " Stinchcomb said.

To local artists, Levine's visibility — and her many lives — is probably the most important aspect of her work.

"What's particularly great about Art vs. Craft is the extent to which Faythe educates the audience about DIY culture, which really makes a difference. The people who come to the event are enthusiastic and informed, and it shows," said artist Melissa Buchanan from Little Friends of Printmaking. "It's not like hawking your wares on the street corner."

Paper Boat Boutique & Gallery

Where 2375 S. Howell Ave.

Hours Noon-7 p.m. Monday-Friday (except Tuesdays, when it's closed); and noon-5 p.m., Saturday-Sunday.

Info www.paperboatboutique.com, (414) 483-8462

5 things you didn't know about this summer's Art vs. Craft

1. There will be a "Make & Take" booth sponsored by Tulip craft suppliers. Shoppers can decorate a free T-shirt, manned by local fashion designers from Fasten Clothing Co-op Gallery.
2. Of the expected 100-plus vendors attending the show, more than 20 new out-of-state vendors will be there for the first time.
3. The Little Friends of Printmaking designed limited-edition, silk-screened canvas tote bags stuffed with swag. They will be handed out for free to the first 200 shoppers on Saturday.
4. There will be a bar with wine, beer, soda and snacks.
5. An all-ages concert featuring headliner Calvin Johnson and local bands Good Night Loving and Trusty Knife will be held at 6:30 p.m. Saturday in the Todd Wehr auditorium. (One more thing: Don't forget to bring some cash; many vendors don't accept credit.)

If you go

What Art vs. Craft

When 11 a.m.-7:30 p.m. Saturday, July 7; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday, July 8.

Where Michael J. Cudahy Student Center, 1025 N. Broadway, on the MSOE campus.

How much \$2 (come Saturday, get in free Sunday)

Info www.artvscraft.com

Levine plays musical saw in Wooden Robot, shown here at the Locust Street Festival in 2005. (Visit www.myspace.com/woodenrobot666.) PHOTO COURTESY OF FAYTHE LEVINE

