

Biting the Big Apple: Two New Zealand Women Making a Splash in Gotham

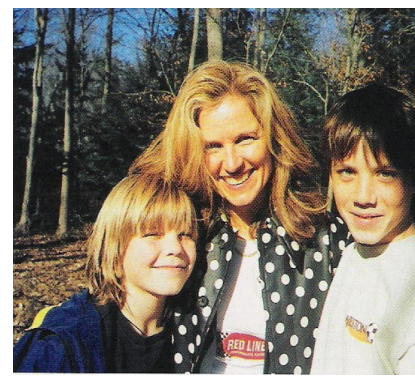
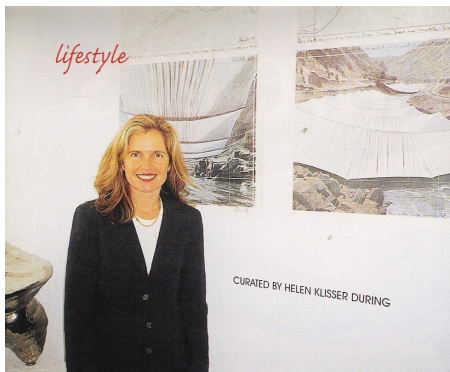
By Tim Wilson

"I try to make the best of both worlds," says Helen Klisser During. "I can be in Manhattan in an hour," she explains, "but I have Connecticut to come back to."

We're moving down the expressway in her black Saab convertible, heading for the Silvermine Arts Centre where she is Gallery Director. It's almost 1pm on a Sunday and 11 hours ago we were driving home from a night out. The evening had been comparatively undemanding. Helen took her boys Max, 13, and Zachary, 11, to the movies. She took her two pug dogs in and out of the house, sometimes on leads. She also roasted a leg of lamb for me and a friend from New York. Then we all went dancing.

Outside the car, beautiful Connecticut, with its silver birches, flicks past. Helen may have Paul Newman as a neighbour, but that doesn't make her house less of a home. The floors creak reassuringly. The kitchen smells of cookies. The shelves are full of books and on the walls hang artworks - from photos of Andy Warhol and paintings by New Zealand artist Gretchen Albrecht to images of her boys.

Helen is 45 but seems to have lived 17 lives, many of them simultaneously. She has represented New Zealand in downhill skiing. She has been the subject of glowing stories in *The New York Times*. She acts as an independent art consultant for people like Saatchi's chief Kevin Roberts. She bakes an excellent apple pie. She teaches a course for local children in art appreciation. Her boys Max and Zachary are the brightest, sweetest guys you could ever hope to meet - and kids are a true measure of parents. At Silvermine, she has doubled the revenue, while improving the gallery's artistic credibility by attracting artists such as Christo (famous for wrapping the Reichstag) and his wife Jeanne-Claude. When she attends Christie's auctions in Manhattan, the doorman allows her to park her car amongst the limousines. "I could never have imagined this, arriving in Boston 16 years ago," she says.



You often read about people like Helen. They seem superhuman, and descriptions of their lives are, let's be frank, exhausting. Their days and nights so full, you think, *what are they trying to escape?* I've known Helen for about a year, and I can say, "Nothing." I've met few people with an ability to relish and consume life so fully. She is petite, gorgeous and funny. She has the best smile you ever saw. She is loyal and kind.

And she is immensely tenacious. While skiing for New Zealand in her teens, she fell and broke her back. She retired from the team. Then at 24, she was invited to present the national Reizenstein's Cup. On the day, Helen suddenly decided she would race, recording the fastest time in the giant slalom. *New Zealand Herald* sportswriter Sir Terry McLean described this in a piece about her called "They Do Come Back." McLean also noted that Helen had 'the most amusing and amused' giggle in the team.

Helen's life in the US is described in her yearly work diaries which she keeps, black-bound and ragged, in a cupboard near her large American fridge. The fridge door holds a poem from son Max,

titled 'To the Best Mom in the World.' The early entries suggest a young woman and her then-husband preparing to leave home and make a life over the ocean. Then the pages empty. Helen arrived in Boston in summer, to a small apartment with no air conditioner. And no friends. "While my husband was at work I was at home waiting for a visa," she remembers, "I didn't know anyone. I was in a new country and I felt very isolated."

The visa arrived, and food seemed an obvious area to work in. Her family once owned Klisser Bakeries, which produced Vogel's bread. Helen had helped them at the bakery, bagging bread. Later she became marketing director.

She approached a national US foodstuffs company called Pepperidge Farm. They said they had only a sales position and, given her experience, they doubted if she would stick it out. She did. Her diary begins to fill as she rose in the company to become the brand manager of the two lines, each worth \$120 million a year. Later, while pregnant with Max, she met another pregnant woman at the doctor's whose family happened to sell limited-edition prints of major artists. "You won't know the artists," said the woman. Helen did and soon after, brokering prints for them, she entered New York's invigorating art world.

Her nationality has helped. "Americans love New Zealanders," says Helen. "I think that being an outsider means that a culture isn't as intimidating. It's somehow more accessible if you aren't aware of the obstacles that a native instinctively recognizes."

And New York is a natural haven for immigrants, many of whom are drawn there for stimulation. During her busiest times, Helen can spend five nights a week in New York, working or socialising. I tagged along with her during a typical evening. She met artist Max Gimblett and assorted New Zealanders at Gimblett's studio in the Bowery.

"Oh no!" said Helen, walking in. "There are too many men here, I'm leaving!" Later we ate dinner at the Agua grill, a restaurant in trendy SoHo. Later still, we sat near a table where movie mogul Harvey Weinstein was entertaining 20 of his closest friends. The place was starkly lit, and by the makeup work by the women around Weinstein, the barely clad, forbidding women who hang around moguls, sparkled as if it contained crushed jewels. They all smoked furiously and, by their expressions, expected to live in splendour forever. How we laughed at them.

Helen leaned to me, solemn momentarily, and said: "All this is wonderful, but the life I have here, I owe to my friends and family."

Helen wheels into the car park at Silvermine. We're just on time. She collects her bag, and begins striding to the front door. "I can't believe how quickly the time has gone," she says, "I feel 18 years old, but I have two gorgeous boys."