

Giving outside artists Accessibility works beautifully

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SUMTER - For the fifth year of the Sumter installation-art show, "Accessibility," organizers turned their gaze outward.

"From the Outside In," organized by the Sumter County Cultural Commission, is a departure, with all the 10 visual artists from outside the area (most are from upstate New York), and three from outside the country (Japan and South Korea.)

It's quite a shift from a project that until now has largely featured works by artists from South Carolina. So is the fact that nearly all the works are displayed outside, rather than in the decaying buildings that artists used in the past.

Artists parachuting into a community for a few weeks or a few days to create art about that community can produce work with an outsider's keen view of an unfamiliar place; such an effort brings about quick, shallow art as well.

In such matters, "From the Outside In," succeeds beyond reasonable expectations. A few of the artists really tap into the community and manage to say something interesting; a few appear to have needed more time both to think and to make; and a few appear to have jumped without a parachute.

The strongest core of work is behind the Sumter County Courthouse and around two modern buildings behind it.

The most striking, and even monumental work, is New York artist Tova Beck-Friedman's "Chrysalis," a huge mound that is both a giant sleeping figure and a bench. The piece appears almost a natural occurrence or something that has been unearthed from eons ago.



Tova Beck-Friedman, "Chrysalis"

On the lush green lawn of the courthouse, Mary Giehl of Syracuse, N.Y., has placed three large flat-bottom boat forms. Inside each are the soles of 25 pairs of shoes. The boats and the footprints represent 25 people who died in a boating accident at the Boykin Mill pond in 1860.

"Remembering the Picnic of 1860" is a poignant, but never preachy, memorial.

A great Southern art form, the quilt, gave Jane Ingram Allen - an upstate New Yorker who is originally from Alabama and is curator of the exhibition - inspiration for her piece, "Making My Bed." She, along with Sumter public school students, created a large wooden bed and covered it with a "quilt" made of paper embedded with flower seeds. The large, colorful work has a popular appeal that some installation art too often lacks.

The most subtly startling piece in the courthouse area is as easy to overlook as the others are to see. A paved plaza in front of the tall county buildings is pretty beaten down. The trees in it look tired, and some of the openings in the pavement where trees once stood contain nothing but sand.

In the blank areas and around the remaining, Lori Goodman of California has stuck a few sprigs of green paper and wire that look like little plants struggling to survive. On the barren plaza and in front of a tall modernist office building, these little sprigs give a message of hope against the elements.

At the other end of Sumter's Main Street, Jennifer Pepper's building awning is monumental, poignant and fun. Titled "The Finger Poets" the awning is an homage to those who worked in the textile industry. The mesh-like awning is covered with cotton boll shapes with statements gleaned from historical sources in Sumter.

Kaoru Motomiya asked Sumter residents to bring her their house plants and filled a store front with them. Nearly all the plants have a story, told by the owners on a video. They speak of plants that have hung on despite years of neglect, plants passed on from family and friends, plants in planters that for decades were on grandparents' porches. These are not perfect plants, which make them, and their stories, all the more important.

Not all the pieces work as well as these, but more than half do, which is a good success rate. Not only that, organizers had a catalog - color copies and staples, but a catalog - ready on opening night.

"Accessibility" has provided a boost for art in South Carolina since its inception. Bringing in artists from around the world was the next logical step. The folks in Sumter are full of ideas, and it will be interesting to see what they'll dream up for next year.