

10 installation artists involve, celebrate community

A Review By JANE G. COLLINS

Special to The Item

Subtitled “From the Outside In,” by Jane Ingram Allen, curator and exhibitor, Accessibility is filled with great collaboration among artists from Asia, the Middle East and the United States. Local artists, community members and students also contributed to the central unifying concept: regardless of race, gender, age or nationality, there is a commonality of mankind.

Canadian artist Jennifer Pepper’s “The Finger Poets,” dedicated to the people who worked in the textile industry in Sumter, especially at Polly Prentiss, is a 25-foot awning on the building beside the old Sumter National Bank on North Main Street.

Plan to visit the Main Street post office where South Korean Hyomyung Kang fuses her new discovery of swamps (she had never seen one before visiting Sumter) and her love of her own Korea into “Stamp Swamp.” Inspired by the still, haunting Sparkleberry swamp, she has created gigantic bamboo trees set onto a reflective metal plate. Strands of South Carolina Spanish moss hang down in eerie clumps. Dangling from the “trees,” postcards with scenes she took from Korea stand stamped and ready for people to study, select, write a message to a friend and pass along to share a glimpse of her homeland. They will be mailed on Saturdays. Restful music invites introspection. When she returns home, Kang will do a companion exhibit with photos she has taken during her stay here.

In another interesting cultural exchange, Yumiko Yamazaki, from Japan, has placed copper discs on the Sumter County Courthouse lawn facing Main Street. Patterned after old Japanese mirrors, over a six-week period the discs will cloud up, oxidize and retain images of Sumter’s earth and sky. She will remove the “Sky Project” and in conjunction with Sumter artist Amylynn Bills-Levi produce prints and photographs to share in an exhibit in Japan. Explanations of the process and a look at her Japanese sky are located in the front of the old Brody Building window on Liberty.

The back lawn of the courthouse holds Mary Giehl’s “Remembering the Past,” a poignant reminder of an 1860 tragedy that happened at Boykin’s Mill Pond near Camden. A copy of the original news item and a later retelling by Bubba McElveen recall the loss of 25 people on an outing. Although originally there was only one boat, Giehl uses three smaller ones, placing the soles of men’s, women’s and children’s shoes to represent the souls lost that day. Facing outward, they serve to accentuate the fruitless attempts to escape to safety.

Appropriately named “Chrysalis,” Tova Beck-Friedman’s large concrete-like bench between the library and the Sumter County Office building holds back pine straw covering things waiting to come to fruition as they mature. Again, we see the piece from the “outside in.”

Whether it was a 12-year-old who dreamed he fell on a cloud and then fell into the ocean and drowned, a girl who offered her t-shirt to a sick, young girl, or a woman who lost everything in a divorce — even bladder control — people dreamed.

Thelma Mathias’ project “Dream Space,” at the Sumter County Library off Harvin Street, involves randomly placing dreams sent to her by people in Santa Fe, N.M., and Sumter with pictures of people from those two areas. The result? A reminder that we all have dreams and that dreams do not always reveal who we really are.

In a two-part exhibit beside the library and Sumter County Office and at Brody’s off Liberty, Jane Ingram Allen presents “Making My Bed.” Made from pulp, the paper dyed, decorated and turned into quilt material by students from Wilder Elementary and Sumter High (now in the windows of the old Brody Department Store) reflects a love of color, design and creativity. The more elaborate handmade beds in the high school exhibit serve as a statement of the value of encouraging artistic expression at all levels, while the seed filling inside the tiny quilts can be planted later to add another artistic dimension.

Santa Fe artist Thelma Mathias stands in the Sumter County Library beside her installation, “Dream Space.”

Allen’s personal installation, near the city’s Holocaust Monument, is a larger-than-king-size “flower bed,” the large quilt squares made by the artist and impregnated with wildflower seeds that will produce spring flowers in the approximate color of the squares. “Little Gem” magnolias serve as bedposts, and the artist wove the headboard and footboard from willow. The concept for the quilt and the bed grew out of Allen’s connection to her Southern female ancestors, many of whom were quilt makers, as were the ancestors of many Sumter residents. Exposed to the elements, with the passage of time the quilt squares will be absorbed and recycled, while the bed itself becomes a “flower bed,” a permanent tribute and celebration of our connection to time, heritage and nature.

The last four installations, along Main Street, reinforce our similarities. Kaoru Motomiya’s Japanese tea ceremony may be over, but her “Sumter Full Pots Garden Show” places locally owned plants of all descriptions among logs, rocks,

hewn boards and unexpected objects to establish a celebration of growing things. A video shares some of the owners' personal stories of plant raising.

Jennifer Pepper establishes the relationship between a building's function and the Southern textile industry. Utilizing an existing awning frame fronting a vacant lot, she combines cotton, chenille balls and language— “dexterous fingers did fly” — to reemphasize looking from the “outside in,” seeing the objects which reflect the activity that might have gone on in the building.

Kurt Gohde's delicious homemade fortune cookies (he tried to make more than 1,000 during his stay and brought extras) may be gone from the Jin Jin Restaurant, but his video tape documenting the process of making them and having people of all ages share “fortunes” to put inside involved introducing his installation from the “outside in.” The video tape can be seen throughout October.

Lori Goodman's “Universal Grass” reflects the overall theme of the installations. Combining the weeds growing in an empty lot of a crumbling structure with bamboo covered with her own handmade paper, she has constructed tufts of “grass” bursting thorough black netting. The tall spikes invite the eye into the interior of the deserted structure to contemplate what might have been and to see that regardless of abandonment and neglect, life struggles on. Sprouts of orange, yellow, brown and black pop up along Main Street, and, like Walt Whitman's poem, we are reminded that “I am grass; I cover all ... Let me work.”

Bernard Fitzgerald and Betsy Acken try out Tova Beck-Friedman's installation “Chrysalis” during the opening of Accessibility 2003 last Saturday.

Features Editor Ivy Moore