

Francis Beaty creates a sculptural piece ‘hatched’ from books

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PUBLISHED: December 15, 2017 at 11:40 p.m. | UPDATED: March 30, 2019 at 6:51 a.m.

How do you describe the indescribable? How do you make real such abstract ideas as consciousness or being?

Allentown artist Francis Beaty has such thoughts and in her installation piece at Re:Find Gallery 724 on Hamilton Street in downtown Allentown, Beaty set out to make real an idea to transform the gallery into a thought she had.

The gallery has a front window that may have once promoted haberdashery but is now strewn with pages torn from books and more pages rolled and placed in concrete blocks, like an ancient library. That’s a clue to what’s inside.

Through the door is “The Hatching,” a floor-to-ceiling installation. It’s massive and intriguing, resembling a honeycomb of paper, like a giant wasp’s nest, and then, as you walk around it and look at it from another direction, a representation of a human heart, kind of.

Many things come to mind, and that’s the point of “The Hatching,” an idea made of chicken wire, 50 feet of it, and printed pages torn from hundreds of books and rolled up with thin wire.

“I have always been fascinated with the idea of consciousness. We are being told that books are a dying medium,” Beaty says. “Where then are our thoughts headed? Are we allowing ourselves to be gobbled up by technology?”

“This installation became an exercise into the unknown for me. I had no idea what I was actually getting myself into when I “hatched” this idea for a sculptural piece and a story about books. Where do your ideas and knowledge actually come from?”

“The Hatching” makes you think. It mesmerizes with shifting patterns that emerge within the twists and turns. Differences in color, even the topography (where some of the pages are pushed in or pulled out) all flow into a mobius strip without beginning or end. You can walk into its heart and walk around it. It’s to be experienced because it is an experience.

Beaty says, “I wanted people to be like ‘Whoa, what the hell is that.’ I wanted this to be like a wall when you first encounter it. At first, you’re not sure what it is, then you start to walk around it.”

Beaty announced on Oct. 26 that the “Hatching was Coming” and it was completed for Third Thursday Nov. 16.

The closing of “Breaking New Ground” will take place during Third Thursday Dec. 21 and will feature a 7 p.m. performance by Lehigh Valley musician Gary Hassay, who wanted to support Beaty’s work. “This will be a duo with my dear friend Janet Young. I will play curved soprano saxophone and do some Tuvan throat singing. Janet will perform on gongs, Himalayan singing bowls, bells and tuning forks.”

“The Hatching” is one element of “Breaking New Ground,” the title of Beaty’s exhibition. The title contains a bit of irony because this exhibition marks a bittersweet ending of sorts. It’s the last exhibit at Gallery 724 before the building comes down to make way for a new one in the continuing revitalization of Allentown’s downtown.

Re:Find Gallery 724, located across from the PPL Center, has been a collaboration between the city of Allentown and Re:Find, a boutique store owned by Ron Susser and Jon Clark, who recently announced a move from 27 N. Seventh St. to 645 Hamilton St. at Two City Center, just around the corner. Re:Find will be open on Seventh Street through Dec. 31 and plan to reopen on Hamilton on Jan. 23.

Gallery 724 has become a vital part of the downtown art scene. It was an unfinished space in an unused building put to use by artists, often attracting crowds for its exhibits, becoming a hotspot on Third Thursdays, the city's arts night.

Abstract conceptual, free-flowing and cerebral, Beaty is known for attempting new things — taking disparate elements and bringing them together to create something unique.

Her enthusiasm to create is infectious. She takes us along on her journey while capturing the freedom of expression that the space represents.

“My goal is to make the space feel different,” Beaty says. “The process was about going on this journey myself Seeing where the shape goes.”

She had a few sketches — which can be seen in the gallery — but the piece ended up taking on a life of its own. “I didn't know it would turn out so solid.”

“The Hatching” is about 10-by-12-feet. Pages, rolled and placed within the links of wire, appear as cylinders of paper, their varying colors and hues differing from aging or the printed material on them.

“This installation relates to the Deconstructivism movement where a geometric ordered element such as chicken wire is transformed into a lively fluid structure by the addition of paper,” Beaty says. “The construction is a space within a space as a means of jarring consciousness. Constructing these pieces was a journey into my own consciousness that I now share with you.”

There is no theme to the pages, their origins random as recycled or donated books or just found while Beaty was doing some dumpster diving.

The wire frame in which the rolled pages rest turns and twists here and there revealing the words “Logos” and “manifest.”

“I didn't want the words to not be respected,” Beaty explains. “It's about words and dialogue and communication.”

There's a contradiction in the work as well. As light and airy as it seems, suspended between planes of floor and ceiling, there is a tension in its massive size and the realization that all of that paper is being held in place only by the weight of gravity.

“It was like painting with paper,” says Beaty. “Seeing beauty in imperfect things.”

Surrounding “The Hatching” are two other works, spawned from the creative moment that transforming the space inspired. “The Mothership” is composed of orange plastic snow fencing and “The Shell that Hatched” is made from window screening that’s billowy and flowing.

All of the works are borne of the germ of her idea, says Beaty, where an armature of chicken wire, suspended from the ceiling led from one idea to another, relating to other pieces in the room by casting shadows.

A recent addition to Beaty’s exhibit is a piece donated by artist/jeweler Thomas Mann, who came to the Lehigh Valley in the summer with a traveling sculpture called “Trajectory Heart,” which Beaty assisted with.

Mann’s sculpture — a whimsical gizmo like a crazy bird house with functioning lights, a wire cage and objects — is a reaction, says Beaty, which is something she encourages. She has asked visitors to write their reactions to “Breaking New Ground” on a scroll of paper on the wall.

Beaty says she was gratified by the participation and input of people into the project, including Patrick Vance, Matthew Kramer-LaPadula and Michael Vecellio. Althea Yuracka and Charlotte Mann helped roll the pages by hand.

After next week, the installation comes down and the bulldozers move in.

“When I look at this it’s just adding more fuel to me,” Beaty says. “It’s the end of this piece but it’s fueling the next one.”

Tim Higgins is a freelance writer.