

# Art Apartment takes viewers on concentration camp journey

Unmistakably, one of the finest installations I have seen in years opens to the public Sunday at The Art Apartment in East Lansing. Local artist Susan Hensel has created a two-room world not to be missed titled "Kristallnacht: the bystanders."

Reflecting on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, identified as the "beginning" of the Holocaust in Germany, Susan has formulated an environment that screams "pay attention!"

"Kristallnacht was a prominent, visible, historical event that can remind us of all the hidden, unseen, historical and contemporary excuses and abuses that we as humans seem so willing to create," she said. "We humans have always created tribes of 'us' and 'them'... of 'our own kind' and 'enemy.' To step inside this exhibit is to confront these issues head-on."

With one foot through the front door, the viewer is transported back to a 1940s or '50s living room. A Women's Home Companion magazine occupies the seat of a wingback chair; a vintage lamp rests atop an aged end table. Catching a glimpse of my own reflection in an antique mirror, I am reminded of my presence in the room. Directly below the mirror a small bookcase houses a collection of themed reading: "Convoy to Auschwitz," "Against Forgetting," "Auschwitz and After." The room is dimly lit and peaceful. A simple and uncomplicated life is lived in this room.

Before I could walk into the next space, I had to stop to examine the wall treatment. Word after word is etched out on stained cloth stretching floor to ceiling. At first it appeared to be random German words scribed in countless rows of black marker. Not until I spoke with Hensel did I become fully aware that each word was a name of a concentration camp. The thousands of names boggled my mind. It seemed a completely impossible fact to realize. Just the time it took Hensel and her assistant, Scott Wilson, to write every name was immeasurable. The artistic effect of the draped muslin, splashed and soiled, adds to the antique feel of the room but also closes in the walls. A sense of what's to come hangs over me as I lead my way toward the next entrance.

Around the corner is an entirely different experience. Small vignettes spread throughout the space explore various subjects. Along one wall stands an altar built of cast hands, blackened as if dead and buried, reaching up toward a German Bible. Stained with years, it is open to hand-written messages like, "Humans have wrought. If not the Gods must be crazy." I noticed a pen dangling from the lectern. Hensel said that she placed the pen there hoping people would have the courage to come and respond. At the base of the altar are more cast hands, this time in white, pointing inward like arrows. Above are two low-lit bulbs splattered with black paint. The detail and preparation is evident in every inch of the installation.

A burlap bag, piled high and overflowing with black coals, sits below a Christ figure glowing from inside an alcove. I cannot see the coals without feeling the symbolism. Directly across the room, piles of salt radiate below an angelic paper face lit from the inside out. Hensel placed these elements, coal and salt, to balance one another high-

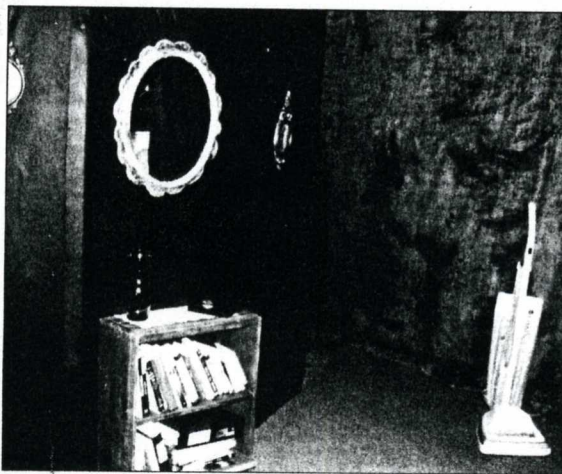


A Women's Home Companion magazine occupies the seat of a wingback chair and a vintage lamp sits on an aged end table for Susan Hensel's new exhibit at Art Apartment in East Lansing.

Photo by Chad DeBruin-Pike



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Themed reading such as "Against Forgetting" and "Convoy to Auschwitz" rest on a bookcase as part of the display. A violin (below, right) is perched on a coil of hand-dyed red rope designed by Susan Hensel.

lighting purity and destruction.

Stacks of wax, resembling bars of gold, are more questioning. Hensel said she finds wax evocative. The scent relates to honey on the altar. Her son thought it was Nazi gold. Whatever the meaning, Hensel described it as an intuitive decision. Another such decision was a violin resting in its case perched on a coil of hand-dyed red rope. The rope itself doesn't hold any meaning but was a "convenient design element," Hensel said.

A beautifully designed scissor display was a definite favorite. Collections of scissors perfectly arranged to dangle from the ceiling with blades exposed cascade to the floor where more are lumped in a pile. This installation is not only reminiscent of the all the possessions hoarded and piled by the Nazis but it is also a physically threatening display.

To round off the exhibit Hensel edited her own sound that fills the air with rattling, breaking glass overtop a high pitched, eerie instrumental with haunting female voices. Matching perfectly with my surroundings, the music left me anxious for peace and serenity.

I am sure that each viewer will take away a unique experience from this installation. "It's a lot of work," Wilson said. "It adds to the impressiveness - the names and places." Hensel said she has worked with these themes for years. "I've just never done any this huge."

The show opens noon to 4 p.m. Sunday. It can also be seen by appointment; call 930-1052. The Art Apartment is located at 210 Abbott Road Suite 12 in downtown East Lansing.

Hensel's work is here, there, everywhere

Sue Hensel is having a busy month.

Along with her installation in East Lansing St. Clair Community College in Port Huron is showing Assembling Memory a large one person exhibit through Nov. 30.

An expanded version of the show took Hensel to New York City last year.

The show features three main bodies of work: literary and narrative sculptures, artistic books and her works of conscience series. The exhibit fills three galleries in the Fine Arts Building on the college campus.

Lastly, Hensel's altar sculptures are featured at Domont Studio Gallery in Indianapolis through Dec. 28 as part of The Spirit & Place Civic Festival.



Hensel

