

Local artist Susan Hensel's story to continue in Minnesota

By HARRY WILLIAMS

I first met Susan Hensel on campus at Michigan State University while bundling up bale after bale of fresh hay in sisal twine under the tutelage of internationally acclaimed sculptors Michael Shaughnessy of Maine and Caoimhghin O'Fraithile of Ireland. That community-based project created a snake-like outdoor hay sculpture of gargantuan proportions that meandered throughout a wooded courtyard near Kresge Art Museum.

Sculpting in a medium based on the traditional seasonal labors of Irish peasants is strenuous work that leaves the flesh raw. Gloves in hand, though, Hensel was there with a smile assisting adults and children in completing that massive undertaking — just as she always seemed to be wherever art was happening in Lansing.

Hensel has now closed the book on the Michigan chapter of her life. An impact player on the local art scene for years, she has moved her home and studio to Minneapolis to continue a career that has won her accolades and, more important, many friends. She took a few minutes before departing to reflect on her past as well as her upcoming adventures.

"Oh, gosh, I will miss the people," Hensel said. "When I moved to Lansing, I put my roots down, and it was a very definite decision. I had not put my roots down before, and I knew I had missed out."

Hensel was raised in upstate New York and spent a year in Taiwan in 1962. She also traveled to Hong Kong, Bangkok, New Delhi, Cairo, Athens, Rome, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Baden, Paris and London

ery that her work is featured in the collection at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

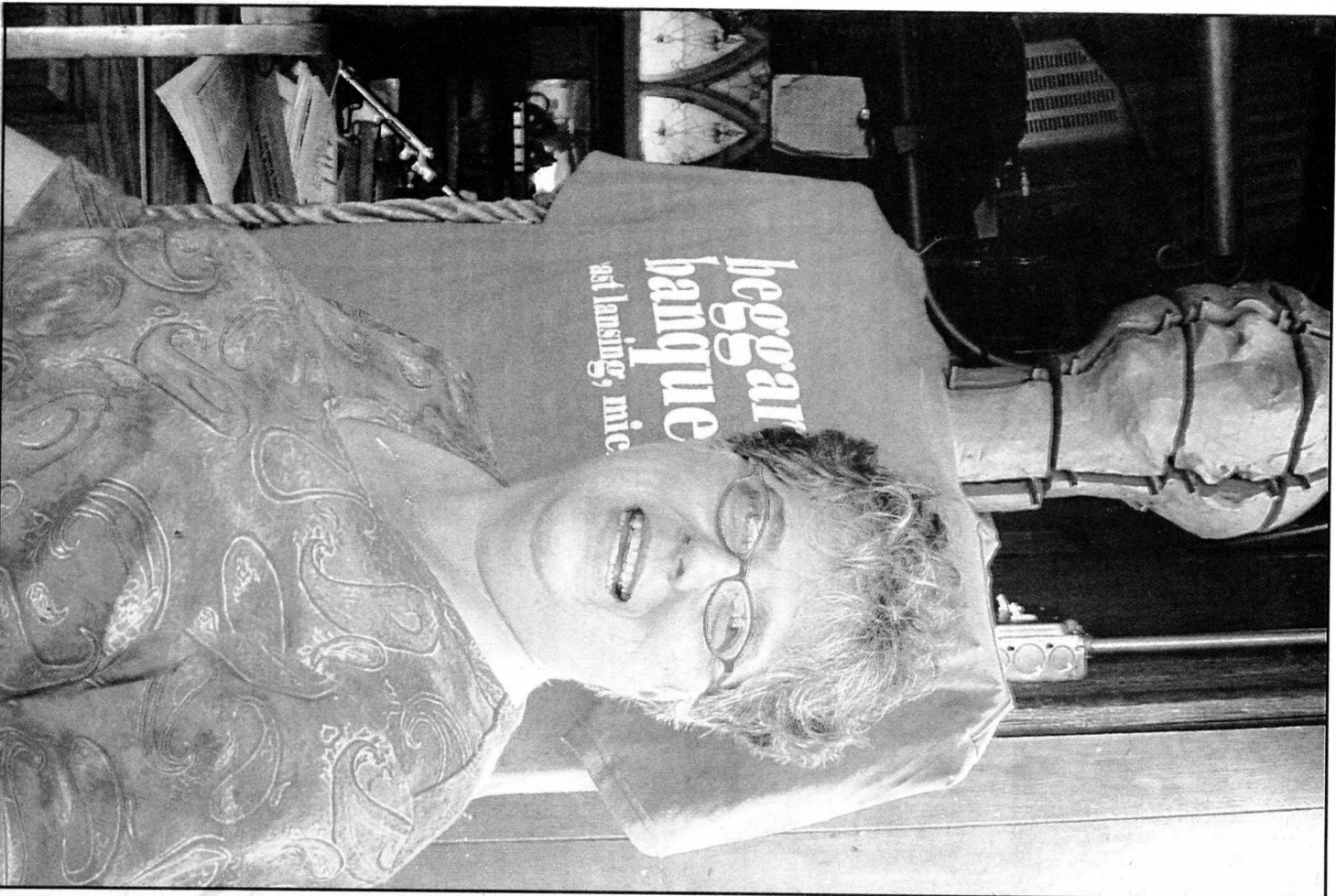
Her personal commitment to the Lansing community has been remarkable. She challenged us to look at art, life and storytelling in unique and often dramatic ways. Along with Nancy McRay and Leslie Donaldson, Hensel was a co-founder of the "Art Apartment," an alternative space that featured installations and performances that pushed the limits of the often provincial local art world.

Her breathtakingly claustrophobic 2001 installation, "Kristallnacht:

The Bystanders," is characteristic of the sort of work that Hensel meticulously researches and executes. "Kristallnacht" — a dark interior full of aromatic beeswax, religious iconography, glistening scissors, piles of salt, disembodied forms of human arms and soiled textiles containing the handwritten names of virtually every Nazi concentration and labor camp — assaulted our senses and our psyches, challenging us to consider what it would have meant to have been tacit participants in such atrocities. The narrative power of the installation had the ability to relocate the viewer in place and time and reinforced Hensel's reputation as a master storyteller.

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Susan Hensel at Beggar's Banquet in East Lansing.

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Hensel was raised in upstate New York and spent a year in Taiwan in 1962. She also traveled to Hong Kong, Bangkok, New Delhi, Cairo, Athens, Rome, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Baden, Paris and London before she entered high school. After briefly attending Cornell University and spending a summer studying in Perugia, Italy, she enrolled in the University of Michigan, where she majored in painting and sculpture.

Even after settling in Lansing, Hensel's life was hardly routine. She made functional art and ceramics but soon began exploring the possibilities of handmade paper. Parenthood then limited her production to working only with clay, and widowhood finally shut down the making of art altogether for some time. The latter experience, however, eventually opened the door to drawing, writing and, significantly, papermaking.

By the 1980s, Hensel was traveling again, seriously researching and studying handmade paper all around the country. Papermaking lead her to begin creating original books — objects that would become her signature medium and allow her to make use of virtually every artistic skill she'd ever learned. Hensel's book art is now recognized nationally, culminating in the recent discov-

storyteller.

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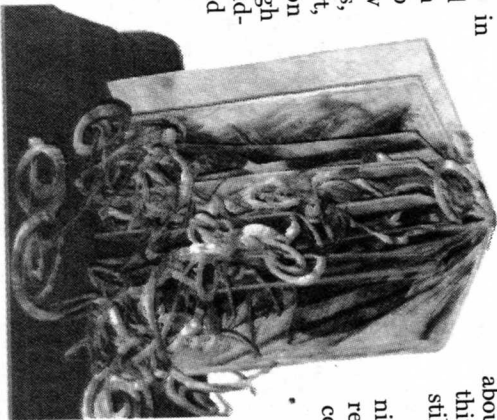
The controversial significance of it all reverberated through the community and generated “Kristallnacht: An Evening of Dialogue,” a panel discussion among artists, community members and local spiritual leaders.

Despite some successes, however, when Hensel is asked what she will miss the least about Lansing, her reply was a swift, “The lack of support for the art community.”

“I had a show in New York about three years ago,” she said. “I hadn't been to New York City in 30 years and I absolutely exhausted myself every day at museums and galleries and bookstores.”

“I was overwhelmed, of course — and had shin splints, of course — and when I came home, I cried for three days. What I was reacting to was leaving a town where culture was so very much at the surface — and coming back to a state where the commitment to the arts just isn't there. I felt like I'd been sentenced to a black hole, and I said, ‘I don't think I can live here anymore.’”

Her selection of Minnesota as the new locale for both her home and her studio was no accident and, as usual, based on extensive research.



(artist's photo) Lansing Art Gallery earlier this year.



Susan Hensel at Beggar's Banquet in East Lansing.

“I am so excited — except for when I'm terrified,” she said. “I'm moving to a larger city, Minneapolis, which has a very strong commitment to art in all its forms. Culturally, it's part of the fabric of the community. And I was looking for a community where storytelling was an appropriate focus.”

“The building that I live in and work in will become a gallery similar in some ways to the Art Apartment, but the focus will be on the narrative in art. That's a broad enough focus that I will be able to incorporate book arts, installation, performance, poetry, story telling — there's a wonderful network of storytellers up there — and painting. Whatever I need to do.”

Hensel is always keenly aware of what drives the essence of her work forward, no matter what form it may take visually.

“Fundamentally, my work is about ‘story,’ and the story dictates the format,” she said. “Sometimes it's a book and sometimes it's a whole freakin' room! Sometimes the intensity is in holding it in your hand, sometimes the intensity is in walking into it and letting it surround you. The project tells you.”

Her excitement about the move extends far beyond the typical hopefulness and anxieties over settling into a new home, setting up her studio, and making new friends. “My first project will be to collect com-

munity stories and work with a muralist to (paint) my building,” she explained. “I'm in a neighborhood that's still affected by gang activity. Indeed, I've already been tagged with blue and red paint. One of the ways to combat that kind of vandalism is to have the community involved in a mural project where stories of this community are told.”

“What I foresee is that it all starts in my building and we develop into a group of people who form a non-profit [organization] and hopefully grow beyond that into another space. The opportunities for funding from foundations are very deep in Minnesota, so there are great possibilities to grow beyond what we were ever able to do with the Art Apartment out of our own pockets.”

The late Gilda Radner once said “Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity.”

Despite life's ambiguities, there is little doubt that the changes Susan Hensel confronts to make will eventually have a real impact on her new community and its arts scene. After all, she once accomplished that here, in a place not nearly as sensitive or receptive to the arts. Lansing's loss will certainly be Minneapolis's gain.