



Hensel gets political. PAULA KELLER

Good Choices

Artist Susan Hensel thought long and hard before moving to Minneapolis. Her new gallery, on the other hand, will take plenty of risks.

By Chuck Terhark

When Susan Hensel makes a decision, she makes good and sure it's the right one. That's why, when the 54-year-old Lansing, Michigan-based artist decided she'd had enough of the state she'd called home for nearly a quarter century, she took another three years to research affordable real estate markets, the vitality of arts communities, and trends in arts funding throughout the country, before finally choosing Minneapolis as her new home.

"I realized that, after spending 25 years in the Midwest, I truly was a Midwesterner," Hensel, a native of Ithaca, New York, says while relaxing

on a Saturday afternoon in her new South Minneapolis gallery and studio space, Susan Hensel Design. "Minneapolis just kept coming to the top of the pile. So I came for a big visit, and I just fell in love with the place."

It is hardly surprising that Hensel came to the conclusion that she did. Minneapolis is a far cry from Lansing, where Hensel was a big fish in a tiny arts community (she became accustomed to the funny looks she would receive whenever she admitted to being an artist). Following a trip to New York City several years ago, Hensel described the culture of her hometown as a comparative "black hole," and she realized that, while she might not belong on a coast, she would

at least enjoy a larger pond. Not only do the Twin Cities boast an impressive track record of arts granting (despite recent budget cuts, Minnesota remains one of the friendliest states in the nation when it comes to publicly funding the arts), but they are also host to a lively storytelling scene, a factor that plays heavily in Hensel's work.

"I learned that my work was about story, and I needed a place where narrative would fly," she says. "I needed a place where the arts are part of the fabric of the community." It took three years, but she found her place,

and on May 1 Hensel and her dog, a bichon frise/poodle/shih tzu mix named Baby, moved into a storefront near the corner of Cedar Avenue and 35th Street.

Hensel plans to focus her studio's work and exhibitions on the narrative aspects of visual art, something she knows plenty about, having achieved a modest amount of national attention for her unique "artist's books." Part storybook, part sculpture, these interactive multi-media pieces invite audiences to venture beyond the traditional role of "viewer" by handling, reading, even smelling them. It is Hensel's wish that viewers will take the piece, comprised as it is of the pieces to a narrative puzzle, and use their own unique perspectives to

create the story. It's that moment during which the viewer becomes the storyteller that most interests Hensel.

"I learned in Lansing that we are a story-making species," she says. She cites a performance artist friend with whom she used to work. "She never internally knew what the performances were about," Hensel says, "but there clearly was a buried narrative there, and every person coming out of her performances would tell me what the story was, because they had to make the story. And that's really powerful stuff.

"With my work, I'm allowing you very often to fill in the story. My point of view is there, but you're bringing your experience to it and coming to your own conclusion," she adds.

A Passion for Books

Hensel's passion for books is obvious upon entering her studio. Not only are the walls lined with them, but she has a whole line of "literary sculptures" with names like "A Reliquary for D. H." (about D.H. Lawrence); "Sylvia" (for Sylvia Plath); and "Emily" (for Emily Dickinson).

Appropriately, Hensel's own artistic story is an interesting one. Having traveled to every corner of the globe before graduating high school, she spent a summer at Cornell University and another in Italy before enrolling at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She then embarked on a 20-year career in ceramics, and soon tried papermaking on the side. ("Everyone needs a hobby," she says. "Even artists.") Parenthood and widowhood sidetracked her for a time, but paper eventually won her heart completely, and Hensel abandoned clay to further pursue her hobby, now a full-time career that led, inevitably she says, to bookmaking, in what she describes as a "seismic shift" in her life.

"I was blown away when I discovered I could bind a book," she says. But soon after, the sculptor inside took over again, leading Hensel to explore all kinds of art forms, infused with her newfound love of narrative. Suddenly, stories were everywhere, not just in books: in sound, in movement, in scent, in sculpture.

"Sometimes a story is most powerful held in the hand," she says. "And sometimes it's most powerful as a freestanding sculpture, a CD, or a large room where you're surrounded by sights and sounds and smells. The vehicle isn't the important part. What's important is that art that really truly functions, the art that stops you in your tracks and makes you figure out what it's all about."

Decisions, Decisions

Considering Hensel's zealous concern with the decision-making process, it's

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Detail fr by Jane