

SUSAN HENSEL GALLERY:

A JOURNEY

BY SUSAN HENSEL

I have worked with alternative spaces and galleries many times over the years. In East Lansing, I was one of three artists that opened the Art Apartment, an

alternative space that introduced mid-Michigan to installation, performance art, sound art and video art. Leslie Donaldson, Nancy McRay and I worked hard, learned to promote heavily and successfully launched a space that was

unique to the area.

No matter what we showed, no matter how abstract or nonlinear, people would come to me to tell me the story they saw in the show. Each person's story was as different as their life experiences. The stories they saw in a performance may have had little relationship to the artist's intent, but were no less valid.

During the time when the Art Apartment was winding down and the principals began to pursue new paths, I had a New York show. I spent a week in New York City and came home knowing that I had done all I could do in mid-Michigan and, after more than 30 years, it was

time to move on.

For three years I looked and thought and wrote about the kind of life and kind of place in which I wanted to be. From the

people who attended our space in East Lansing, I learned that we are a story making species and I wanted to provide more opportunities for people to tell, hear and discover their stories. I came to under-

stand that stories carry great power in our lives and communities. Stories are the mythology by which we live. I also realized that stories can be used for activism; change your story, change your life.

As I looked for the location for the next phase of my life, I knew I wanted to live in a town where the arts, ALL the arts, are a valued part of the fabric of the community. I knew I was a storytelling sculptor/book artist. I knew that I wanted to share my stories and those of other artists in a welcoming environment. I researched the art scene all over the country, looking at the economic trends in the arts, looking at investments in muse-

um building, looking at how various areas contended with the normal ups and downs of the economy. Given that I cannot abide too much hot, summer weather, Minneapolis

kept rising up to the top of the pile.

I relocated to south Minneapolis in May, 2004 and bought a wonderful old storefront with upstairs living quarters. The gallery/workspace is devoted to the narrative impulse in art. It's mission is threefold: First, to communicate stories using all the senses and any media, transforming the personal into the universal or political; Second to change readers/observers into active participants in the art experience; And third to share ideas and stories by creating opportunities for public interaction. The Susan Hensel Gallery celebrated its first year in Minneapolis in the September of 2005.

What did the gallery accomplish in its first year?

Never one to let moss grown under my feet, I put out a call for art for that first September on the theme of electoral politics. As I awaited the applications, I sent out loads of press releases introducing the gallery and went on a local radio show for an interview. (I was so new to the community I had to take

"It is exciting and challenging on a daily basis. I pinch myself each morning when I awake in this wonderful building in this wonderful city. I am so grateful that my life led me here. I am also grateful to all the artists trusted me to show their work with care in the first year of the Susan Hensel Gallery."

a friend with me to find the station!) I do not like panicking about what to do next so, I plan ahead and put things on my calendar, began booking and the gallery managed seven

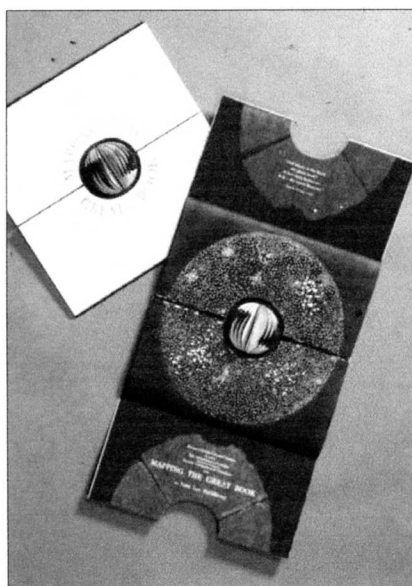
shows in its first year!

It has been rewarding. Some things went far better than expected including the ease of finding good art and the excitement surrounding the openings. Some things were harder than expected like balancing personal art with the gallery, maintaining attendance, maintaining consistent press interest and getting the TV cameras here.

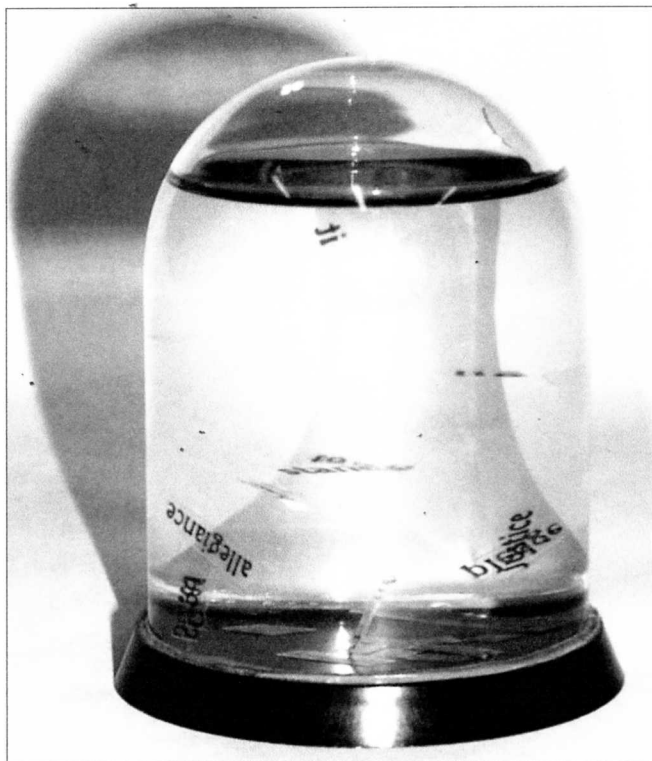
The initial show, All Things Electoral, was followed by "A Leap of Faith" (see B&L4.2). War Games, Reader's Art 5, Do Not Name Your Food, Poems of Loss and Desperation and The Night finished out the first year in Minneapolis.

What did I learn?

Planning ahead is a good thing! Even with the best planning, there will always be brush fires to get out. Airplanes will lose luggage, artists will forget to send important info or even the piece (OK, I forgot to send a piece to St Louis and had to overnight it!). The post office will unexpectedly deliver all your postcards back to you and the plumber will suddenly appear with expensive necessities. So, reduce the number of brush fires you must contend



Mapping the Great Book. Nora Less McGillivray. Photo by Tim Nelson.



Oh Say. William Harroff.

with by doing as much advanced planning as possible. The needs of the press are universal. You must send press releases tailored to various media. Newspapers, generally, are in the business of "people stories." While some do have art sections and art critics, many do not. So write the press releases highlighting the unusual nature of the art: for example "local artist makes good"; "artists with disabilities succeed"; "the experience of military families"; "GLBT community artists exhibit"; "unusual materials used"; and "you can touch the art." Always send to local alternative media, they are your friends. Art magazines want "artspeak" reviews or brief how-to's. TV wants great visuals. Radio wants great language.

Solo shows are easier to administrate than group shows. Group shows always have larger opening night audiences. Generally speaking, attendance

is unpredictable. The gallery has been both swamped and bereft of guests. The attendance seems to be directly proportional to our press coverage.

Do unto your artists as you would have galleries do unto you. I look on each show as an event and as installation art. I consider space, light, sound and food to all be part of the art experience. My artists and I are telling stories. Everything I do in the installation of the show affects that.

Lastly, we need someone to hear and see our stories. What good is telling a story if there is no audience? So, I promote, promote, promote. Direct mail, email, email list serves and groups are key promotion tools. My webpage previews each show, shows the installation and generally follows up with a web movie. For each opening I distribute through email, postal service, and flyer placement over 3000 promotional pieces. It



From "Poems of Loss & Desperation."

Paintings by Tim Lane & Travis Pickard, with Baby the studio dog.

is time consuming work. My artists get copies of all our successful press placements. This year we have had 18 articles published in both local and national media for the 6 shows. The distribution through the year is uneven, but the shows generally do get covered somewhere.

It is not hard to find good art. And sometimes, good art just doesn't fit the look of a particular show, no matter how good it is.

It is still hard to balance my own artwork time with the needs of the gallery. They both take tremendous concentration, using was feels like totally different parts of the brain.

What will I do differently this year?

I will schedule more events this year, starting with a free drop-in collage workshop as part of a city-wide celebration

of the arts. I plan to schedule more in between events in the gallery like poetry readings, music, and workshops. Last year I had two special events in the gallery that brought in a completely different clientele than the openings. I will continue to seek timely themes and keep planning ahead.

The second year is now scheduled:

- ~ LIFE CYCLES: Encaustic & Mixed Media by Leslie Sobel
- ~ LEAP OF FAITH 2: At the Intersection of Faith & Politics
- ~ DESIRE: Installation by Susan Hensel
- ~ READER'S ART 6: on the theme of Change
- ~ INDIA IN MINNEAPOLIS: Stories of a Diaspora
- ~ THREADS IN SPACE: Sculptural knit/crochet/fiber

Visit the website www.susanhenseldesign.com for more information. ☺