

A New Chapter: Artist Susan Hensel graduates from clay to multimedia book pieces

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For more than 20 years Michigan artist Susan Hensel molded and manipulated clay.

But it was paper that would unleash her muse.

Through paper she came alive. Through paper she became a provocative storyteller. The art form began as a hobby; she made the paper from pulp. Soon the paper became books and the books became multimedia art pieces.

With little haste, the clay was ushered out the door.

"What I was doing with clay was way too obtuse," Hensel said from her home in East Lansing, Mich. "It was only meaningful to me. It was important to me to tell my stories in a way that they would become very universal."

Besides, she said, "I have a huge library of books. When I realized I could make them, it was incredible."

A selection of the books will be featured in a solo exhibit opening Friday at the Charleston Heights Arts Center. The exhibit continues through Aug. 24.

Colorful and dense, the books are filled with objects, images and words that tour Hensel's unconscious while luring readers down their own imaginative pathways.

Some are neatly packaged; opening them becomes an event. Some demand to be explored. No subject is unapproachable. Hensel delves into politics, religion, faith, childhood, and even whimsically examines the brushing of one's teeth.

Among the collection is "Surgery," a thread-bound book with a skeletal rib cage is its cover. Inside, poetry and prose are used to convey a surgery through three voices: a patient's, a philosophical scientist's and a fairy tale character's.

In another book, titled "Stamp Album," Hensel explores the practical use of postage stamps with underlying questions about the governments that create them.

The book states the obvious: Stamps are licked, moistened and stuck on an envelope "as a symbol of a fee for a service." But then the questions follow: "Does postage magnify the dream? Does it tell a true history of a true time?" or "Can postage celebrate how cheaply life is valued?"

In "Give Me the Words," Hensel looks at helping people through the processes of life. Carefully arranged and text heavy (with each letter of the book's title separating the pages), the book is one of Hensel's performance literature pieces.

"I don't know why they trust me so," Hensel writes. "I have no special wisdom. I wander and roam in regions of fear just as they do.

"I have, however, come out of the other side of the bog more than once. I know some of the trails. I can avoid some of the muck and quicksand even though I get stuck from time to time and need someone to give me the words."

Hensel, 53, says poetry is her first love; Emily Dickinson is her favorite poet. Hensel considers herself a book evangelist, though her books often deviate from the conventional form.

"Some books become installations," Hensel said. "I'm beginning to bring sound into some of the pieces. It increases the experience of the book.

"I seem to be coming full circle and coming back to my sculptural roots more and more."

Hensel's "narrative sculptures" tell stories through words, images and touch. Her "literary sculptures" focus on writers Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, D.H. Lawrence and Sappho. They evolved from her studies on the relationship between creativity and insanity -- a connection, she asserts, that has become an accepted "mythology."

"There also is a creativity that comes out of sanity and is no less deep," Hensel said. "Creativity is our birthright as human beings. And I wanted to separate it out from the madness.

"I'm very clear that my creativity on some level keeps me sane. I gotta make stuff. I gotta tell stories. It's very key to keeping me grounded. We are all storytellers. It's hard-wired into us. We are story makers."

Universal shift

In conversation, Hensel is articulate and focused and exudes a sense of humor -- no matter how trying the topic may be. She grew up in the Finger Lakes of New York in the 1950s. As a teen she traveled extensively throughout Europe and Asia, living in Taiwan in 1962.

She later moved back to the United States and graduated from the University of Michigan with a bachelor of fine arts degree in painting and sculpture. She pursued her interests in pottery and decorative ceramics, and began to make paper in the mid-1970s.

When her son was born, Hensel set aside the pulp and focused only on clay. After her husband's death, she returned to paper. She had just turned 40, she said, and was writing "as if being channeled."

"I found I needed to express myself in different ways," Hensel explained. "Paper started showing up in the different sculpture I was doing. Eventually paper began to take over everything. It was a fairly dramatic sweep."

During a paper-making course in the 1980s, Hensel was shown how to bind a book. The experience, she said, changed her universe.

Soon she was traveling cross-country to study paper and bookmaking, eventually landing at a Paper & Book Intensive, a biannual event that draws book artists from all over the world.

The event, Hensel said, "confirmed for me that what I was starting to do was the right thing to do. I felt set free."

Origin of tales

Bookmaking is now a full-time effort. Hensel teaches classes and workshops, including an August workshop in Las Vegas that focuses on Japanese bookbinding.

"I'm pretty driven," Hensel said, referring to the extensive collection she has created. "Most of these pieces take many years. The writing happens in fits and spurts."

Hensel's stories can leave readers scratching their heads over the origins. For example, "George's Banana," a banana-yellow book that tells the story of character George's metaphorical cane in life: a banana.

"George is walking down the street carrying a banana," Hensel writes. "I have no idea why this dapper little man is carrying a banana. Neither does George. Remember how they feel when you hold them? They are rather waxy and cool with firmer edges. They contain POTENTIAL."

The banana is placed in George's pocket. Hensel continues: "The club foot does not show ... the favored leg is strengthened by the rhythm of the banana."

In the end, Hensel writes: "The banana falls from George's pocket. Yet George continues to be all things that a banana can become."

Other books tell stories of life and death, such as a woman hopelessly rearranging her life and never achieving satisfaction and solemnly looking at memories and longings.

With books, Hensel said, there are no limits.

"Any way you can hold the pages together, you can make a book."

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