

Brushstrokes:

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Chapel Hill Community Art Project uses clothing to tell stories

BY DEBORAH R. MEYER

When the request went out last year for artists to submit ideas to be considered for the town of Chapel Hill's 2012 Community Art Project, Chapel Hill artist Jan-Ru Wan responded, prompted by the confluence of recent events in her life.

Wan, who was born in Taiwan, is an assistant professor at N.C. State's College of Design. Textiles have long been her medium, but they took on an even more personal meaning when in the past three years she lost her maternal grandmother, who ran a shop that made mosquito netting, and her father, who was a government official for 40 years.

She created a series of works about her father and her relationship with him, using his shirts, which she had ironed as a young girl, as her theme.

She created another piece, "Things We Carry in Life," that she made from her grandmother's clothing.

"She had a stroke near the end of her life, and I was thinking about what the human mind is like when we get near the end," Wan said. "I feel like I am lucky to use these things to keep them forever by using them in the art."

On top of those personal experiences linking art with aging, she happened upon a scholarly article on how textile activity helps aging populations, and her idea was born.

Wan's Community Art Project, "Up Close and Personal," involves 200 cloth panels that she invited community members to embellish with such things as fabric, parts of old clothing that meant something to them, paint, writing, sewing, and screen printing. She then sewed the panels together to create long banners.

"The materials and the cloth can tell people a story and convey emotions more than words can express," Wan said.





The textile installation that will hang permanently at the Robert and Pearl Seymour Senior Center. Participants also created new clothing out of various parts of old clothing.

"We need more interaction with one another," said Jeff York, Public and Cultural Arts Administrator for the town of Chapel Hill. "To me this project was about neighborliness."



The "Up Close and Personal" textile art work combines hundreds of pieces of fabric, old clothing and other items contributed by local residents.

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If You Go A celebration "Up Close and Personal," the Chapel Hill Community Art Project's art and artists, is scheduled for 3 p.m. May 23 at the Robert and Pearl Seymour Center, 2551 Homestead Road. A Senior ReFashion Show featuring the project's reconstituted clothing will be held at 5 p.m. May 30 at the Seymour Center and at 6:30 p.m. May 31 at University Mall, 201 S. Estes Dr.

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The project kicked off in early January when Wan gave a lecture at the Seymour Center on "The Journey of Re-materialization." Then came workshops where participants and Wan created the pieces.

"I look at clothes as a way to express myself," Wan said. "Some clothes make you weak, or powerful. Some go back to your mother's hug. We always have a memory of clothes."

Lauren Diamond, who takes craft and exercises classes at the Center and loves to sew, participated in making panels and used her aunt's dress and her mother's apron to create re-fashioned clothing.

"My aunt is in a coma now and my mother has passed away. I remember them wearing these things," she said. "My mom was the greatest cook and baker. The apron reminds me of her."

Artist and dancing storyteller Jody Cassell heard Wan's lecture at the Center and immediately connected with her and her work.

"I recently lost my father and am using this piece as an inspiration to create a costume for my dancing storytelling about opening my heart to him in his time of decline," Cassell said.

Janine LeBlanc has known Wan for years and relished the idea of working with her. An artist, LeBlanc is also a textile consultant to the Gregg Museum.

"What I liked about this project was learning a different way of thinking of objects," she said. "What I do at the Gregg is catalog objects and do some conservational stitching. But what I was doing in this project was totally opposite; I was taking apart and turning things upside down. It helped me free up my thinking. There were no set boundaries."

Textile artist Kimberley Cartwright employed her raw-edge appliqué technique on panels. Wan shared all of her collected textiles with participants.

"Whatever she has she makes it available for you," Cartwright said. "I was transformed. I feel a little bit freer now when I do my work."

Wan said every single step of this process was a big surprise for her.

"Each stitch and decoration depended on community," she said. "Every little panel brings me to tears. It is truly a community work and a community voice."

"Up Close and Personal" is sponsored by the town of Chapel Hill's Public Arts and Cultural Arts Office and the Orange County Arts Commission, and supported by the Seymour Center and University Mall.

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