

Honoring Grief Through Art

Meditations and transformations in the cemetery

Wander along paths among woodland native plants, pass through heavy copper doors, enter an Egyptian Revival mausoleum, and be greeted by rows upon rows of blessing bowls, hand-woven banners, and paintings large and small.

Ceramic artist Judy Alison wanted to create an interactive sacred space; Fran Ross, whose husband, John Bredesen, is president of the Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association, suggested Hope Abbey Mausoleum as a fitting space. With Ross as curator, the project grew to include two more artists, Marilyn Robert and Michael Kroetch. The result is *Textures of Memory*, an art exhibit in, and for, a sacred space.

Alison says, "My mother died 16 years ago and I'm still grieving at certain moments. Clay is a way for me to be present in those moments."

She is a pinch potter and doesn't use a wheel. Her relationship to clay is intense, by turns playful and contemplative. There is also a spiritual quality to Alison's interaction with her earth medium, which is reflected in her blessing bowls. "Each bowl is a meditation as well as a conversation between hands and clay," she says.

At once self-contained and open, fragile and timeless, these blessing bowls are, in their rounded simplicity, visually gratifying. Alison keeps their outer surface unadorned but glazes them within in single delicate colors. The bowls are designed to be held: they fit most satisfyingly in the palm.

They are made of raku Georgian clay, and 305 of them sit on the marble ledges of the crypts in Hope Abbey. "There is something about these blessing bowls in formation," says Alison. "It acquires a dimension of some sort and changes the space."

In the main hall stands her pile of small ceramic stones of various clays. "We've been marking graves with stones since we've been marking graves," Alison says. "I make these stones to mark the graves."

Alison provides clay for people to make stones of their own to add to the pile or take



Le Creux, mixed-media painting by Michael Kroetch. The Northerner, mixed-media painting by Michael Kroetch

home. Visitors can write on paper slips and place them in a ceramic vessel; the slips will be burned during the final ceremony. Most weekends, Alison will also guide clay meditation "hands-on" workshops.

Michael Kroetch's gleaming paintings complement the clay. Kroetch's pieces enliven the space with a vibrancy of hue that makes the mood soar. The huge painting which greets visitors upon entering is particularly striking, at once bold and subtle.

Kroetch's smaller paintings fit precisely on the crypts' marble ledges. Like superimposed transparencies, ghostly layers of imagery combine places and people, architectural backgrounds and close-ups of wistful faces. *Le Creux* is a powerful expression of grief and existential angst. In *The Northerner*, a composition in cool blue tones, a woman's face appears trapped behind a thin shroud of ice, her large eyes interrogating the world.

Kroetch is a writer, video-artist, photographer and painter. Self-taught and perpetually experimenting with new media, Kroetch is reticent about revealing his tech-

niques. Because he applies inks and paints on damp plaster and then covers them with a thick layer of resin, Kroetch views them as part frescoes, part stained-glass windows.

Marilyn Robert, a fiber artist and LCC instructor, wove nine lengths of black-and-white linen cloth into site-specific banners mounted to the base of the main-hall windows. "There are multiple references with this piece – to bell pulls, shrouds, vestments," Robert writes. "The long vertical form emphasizes the height of the ceiling. The black-and-white tabby weave structure reacts with the pattern in the marble, and provides textural contrast." These banners integrate the space with organic, subtle harmony.

Love You, Robert's outdoor installation, is a memorial to her mother. The piece consists of eight sisal-and-cloth-wrapped bamboo pieces chosen for their qualities of strength and endurance. "She wrapped her family in love, nurturing all of us," Robert writes of her mother, an accomplished quilt-maker.

Established in 1859 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the Masonic Cemetery is Eugene's oldest offi-

cial cemetery, with residents that include city founder Eugene Skinner, Oregon's first governor John Whiteaker, civil war veterans, several university presidents and a who's who of prominent Eugene families.

Hope Abbey mausoleum was designed by Ellis Lawrence, the founder of the UO's School of Architecture and Allied Arts, and built in 1913. Although it had fallen into disrepair, members of the EMCA are working on restoring the Egyptian revival building, including replacing the roof, creating new stained-glass windows and polishing the heavy copper-clad doors.

The woodland site is a historic botanical garden with more than 100 native species. In January, EMCA received the Eugene Tree Foundation's Big Leaf Award for "excellence in stewardship of an urban forest."

Avail yourself of a brochure for self-guided tours of the grounds, and combine art with nature through the closing date of July 16. More information, including details about the workshops and the closing ceremony, is available on the website, www.eugenemasoniccemetery.org **EW**



Blessing Bowls, ceramic by Judy Alison

