

‘Magnolia,’ homage to S.C., opening at FAC

BY IVY MOORE
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The Bassett Gallery at the Fine Arts Center of Kershaw County in Camden will present “Magnolia,” an art exhibition by Jen Pepper, opening with a 6-7:30 p.m. reception on Friday. Born in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, Pepper splits her time between Sumter and Central New York, where she is an associate professor of art at Cazenovia College and director of the college’s art gallery.

She holds a bachelor of fine arts degree from The Maryland Institute College of Art and a master of fine arts degree from The University of Connecticut.

Pepper has exhibited nationally and internationally in 22 solo exhibitions to date and has participated in more than 60 group exhibitions since 1990. Her work has been shown in international and national venues including the UK, Japan, Canada, New York City and other gallery and museums throughout the U.S. including the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, N.Y., The Schweinfurth Memorial Art Center, Munson Williams Proctor Art Institute, The Herbert J. Johnson Museum and many others.

In addition, she has been the recipient of many grants and awards, including The National Endowment for the Humanities, New York State Council on the Arts, New York State Foundation for the Arts, Astraea National Visual Artist fellow (NYC) and The Constance Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts. She has been invited to and has participated in numerous national and international residencies, and her work is included in many private and public collections, including those of Paul J. Schupf in New York, the National Gallery of Macedonia,

Foundation Valparaiso, Al-ermia, Spain, Casa Museo Solaina de Piloño, Galicia, Spain, and others.

Her work can also be found in the private homes of many S.C. collectors.

Pepper titled her tribute to South Carolina “Magnolia,” she said, “Because it’s a flower from the South, and it seems to change its form in the seasons. I love how the tree grows and spreads out like an umbrella, sheltering. I love its seed pods, many of which I’ve taken into my classrooms for my students to draw. I’ve also cast them in aluminum. And of course, they don’t grow in the North.”

Pepper first visited South Carolina when she was curated into Sumter Accessibility 2003 and has since spent many weeks here each year, including eight long, hot summers.

In her artist’s statement, Pepper wrote: “My work explores the intersection between language and the body and their interaction with the physical and emotional environment.”

That is a large part of her attraction to South Carolina, as she explained Thursday.

“First of all I love the light here — it’s incredibly clear and crisp,” she said. “It really is a lot like the light in Spain, where I was when I got the call to Sumter (Accessibility 2003). But I also like the incredible storms, how the weather changes, the extremes — the heat and torrential rains. The sunsets and cloud formations are magnificent. Another thing that inspires me is the smell of wet dirt, kind of dank. The color here is as if solid to sculpt, and people’s gardens are amazing.”

Pepper said she enjoys the summer, moving from cold, air-conditioned interiors to hot, wet pavement



PHOTOS PROVIDED
ABOVE: In 2010 “that which cannot be held,” a solo exhibition of Jen Pepper’s installation work opened “The Edge of Art: New York State Artist Series” at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse. It was reviewed in the March 2011 *Sculpture* magazine. An exhibition of her recent work opens Friday at the Fine Arts Center of Kershaw County.

RIGHT: Pepper, who splits her time between New York and South Carolina, will have her recent works inspired by her experiences in the South in a solo exhibition at the Bassett Gallery at the Fine Arts Center of Kershaw County from Jan. 20-Feb. 29. The opening reception is set for 6-7:30 p.m. Friday at the gallery on Lyttleton Street in Camden. Admission is free.



after a summer shower. “It’s a steam bath,” she said. “I love the contrasts, and that translates into my work. The bugs here, the birds, the sounds of the cicadas.”

“Besides the nature side, I love the sense of commitment to community; and many people that were acquaintances in 2003 have become good friends, and really, family.”

Pepper is also intrigued by the history of the area.

“I wondered why there seem to be so many ghosts in the South, and a friend told me ‘It’s because we love our ancestors.’ You can really feel the history.”

“For me those are poignant issues, and I take those experiences back to

my work.” The physical act of drawing reflects her experiences, as well.

“I do a lot of drawing with wet material (mainly ink) — because of the fluidity — on very heavy rag paper that absorbs it, kind of the way the body absorbs these experiences and feelings,” she said.

“So a lot of the mixed media pieces in the show are about these experiences, like ‘Sound of Cicadas,’ ‘Steam’ and ‘Swell.’ All the work in the show is inspired by my time in the South.”

While Magnolia includes ink work, Pepper has returned to watercolor and gouache.

“The gouache is opaque watercolor, and I

like the density of it because it feels very sculptural,” she said. “Watercolor is very clean and sharp, pure.”

Quilting, which Pepper was introduced to two years ago, is also an influence for this show.

“I think of color as almost a solid form,” she said. “I come from a family of stitchers, and when I was a child I used to go into the fabric store and hide between bolts of fabric. My introduction to the quilting experience by (Sumter’s) Barbara Reich ... I think of quilting as painting with blocks of color.”

The Bassett Gallery at the Fine Arts Center of Kershaw County presents “Magnolia,” an exhibition

by Jen Pepper opening with a reception from 6-7:30 p.m. Friday. The public is invited to attend, and there is no charge for admission. The exhibition continues through Feb. 29 during regular gallery hours, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday through Friday and weekends by appointment.

The FAC is located at 810 Lyttleton St., at the corner of York Street in Camden. To get to the FAC, take US 521 North into Camden, at the first traffic light turn right onto York Street, go two blocks to Lyttleton and turn left. The FAC is on the immediate right.

For more information call (803) 425-7676, or visit the website www.fac-camden.org.

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Recalling the quilts made by women from scraps of their family’s clothing, which she called “very special,” Sisson said, “There are people now who bring me their kids’ clothes to make quilts. I do a lot of T-shirt quilts — they don’t want to get rid of the shirts because they’re memories, so we put those memories into a quilt for them so they can keep them.”

Sisson said she often has people bring in items of clothing that belonged to deceased members of their families.

“Like their grandfather passed away, and they want to give a memory quilt to their grandmother,” she said. “I’ve done that type of thing. And quilts from baby clothes. It’s all

about the memories.”

However, most of the quilts made by her students and her regular customers are made from purchased fabric and “go on their beds, or they’re gifts for people who mean a lot in their lives.”

Sisson explained that there are three parts to making a quilt; making the top, or the decorative part, is called “piecing.” It’s generally done with a sewing machine.

“It’s not a quilt until the back is on it; until then it’s just a top,” she said. The quilt has batting — the filling between the two layers that provided the warmth and the “fluffiness.”

The binding is the edge that joins the top and bottom, giving

a quilt its finished or re-fined appearance.

“That’s almost always done by hand,” Sisson said. “Sometimes a group of us will do the binding together.”

A GIFT THAT ENDURES
Not just an act of love, for Sisson, making and gifting a quilt is the proverbial “gift that keeps on giving,” as well as a return to traditional values.

“We’ve become a disposable society,” Sisson said. “People go to (big box stores), and they buy something and they throw it away when it breaks. They buy cheap, mass-made; there’s no personal attachment to it whatsoever. Now, you make a quilt, you’re putting in so much of your time and your money, and you’re giving something to someone that is handmade,

one of a kind, and it’s going to last, if you make it well. It’s not something you wear out and throw away. It’s a much more special gift than going to that store and buying one for \$29.95 that was mass produced.”

“A hundred years from now,” she said, “I want my grandchild to be able to say ‘My grandmother made this for me.’ How special is that? If I buy some toy, it’s not going to have the same meaning, and it’ll eventually end up in a landfill somewhere.”

Sisson’s customers range in age from their early 20s to 93. She’s happy to accommodate their needs.

“We stay open until 8 on Tuesday nights, so those who work can come in and play,” she said.

Others come in during the

day for the same reason.

Two of Sisson’s regular customers came into the shop Tuesday afternoon and sat in the “quilters’ bar” to chat.

Carolyn Anderson and Paula Barth laughed about their UFOs, or “unfinished objects” — neither of them would admit to how many they have — and caught up with Sisson and her 17-year-old daughter, Skyler, who’s been quilting since she was around 14.

“We really come for the fellowship,” Anderson said. “You have to have your mental therapy along with your actual work.”

Treadle Pushers, at 860 W. Liberty St., is open Monday-Saturday. For more information, contact Sisson at (803) 773-0503. www.treadlepushers.com or on the Facebook page.

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