

Fiber artists to unveil newest installation in Glen Helen

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On Sunday, Nov. 19, local multimedia artists Kathi Seidl, left, and Beth Holyoke will unveil their newest collaborative installation in Glen Helen's Vernet Ecological Center: "Fungi Fantasy/Looking," a fiber-based, floor-to-ceiling cropping of mushrooms and more. (Photo by Reilly Dixon)

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No Comments

There's a new fungus among us — at least in the Glen Helen Nature Preserve.

On Sunday, Nov. 19, local multimedia artists Kathi Seidl and Beth Holyoke will unveil their newest installation: a kaleidoscopic fairy ring of felted and crocheted mushrooms clustered up and around the central pillar in the atrium of the Vernet Ecological Center.

Sunday's artist reception will take place 3:30–5 p.m. and will give attendees the opportunity to meet and greet the artists as well as their fiber-based fungi.

The creative thrust behind the installation, Seidl and Holyoke told the News last week, was to explore the varied forms, colors and shapes contained in the fungal world.

"With mushrooms, there's always an element of surprise," Seidl said. "They exist everywhere — above ground, underground. Mushrooms are just so interesting and unique."

Owing to these surprising idiosyncrasies, "Fantasy Fungi," as the installation was dubbed, invites viewers to pause and look carefully — to note the differences between the charming toadstools and the frilly chicken of the woods, to observe the strands of mycelium that connect these organisms.

And in looking closely, viewers may find the installation looking back.

"Yes, we put a bunch of eyeballs throughout," Holyoke said with a chuckle. "Like mushrooms, eyes are also fascinating."

As the installation's description hanging in the atrium notes, the little eyes littered throughout the piece work as symbols and reminders of the importance of observation and awareness of the natural world.

Glen Helen Executive Director Nick Boutis said he was pleased by this artistic endeavor.

“You’ll get the most out of this piece if you spend time with it and look around and see what you find by exploring the colors and shapes,” Boutis said. “The same is true of the Glen — you’ll get more out of your experience here if you take the time to focus your senses.”

True to that sentiment, the eyes within the work aren’t readily perceptible — viewers have to look carefully to discern the eyes from the fungi.

“It always interests us, as artists, to put things that aren’t always obvious in our works,” Seidl said.

What is obvious, however, in “Fungi Fantasy,” are the meticulous details and time it took the two artists to knit, crochet, felt and stitch all of the intricate parts together. According to Holyoke, the two have spent the last several months working on the floor-to-ceiling installation.

“I’ve been working on these ideas since the summer,” Holyoke said of the tedium. “Not to mention, [the atrium] is a really difficult space to work with. There are a lot of hard materials: stone and really big pieces of wood. Art galleries are often more neutral, and this space is the opposite of that.”

Though the pair agreed they weren’t sure that the installation was entirely finished — a belief often shared by many makers, they joked — the artists said they’re nevertheless proud of that incidental juxtaposition of soft materials set against the rough angular canvas of the Vernet Ecological Center.

Seidl and Holyoke said they were also proud of the installation’s material makeup: All of the fibers used were either recycled or repurposed yarns, felts and fabrics.

“Leftover yarn, cut-up old sweaters — those kinds of things,” Seidl said.

It’s that act of reusing and recycling their artistic materials that drew both Seidl and Holyoke to making their mushrooms out of fibers, and also away from their more typical media of plaster and clay. In the past, the artist pair has made clay sculptures, benches, trash cans and even covered straw bale homes of earthen plaster.

“But I’m moving away from ceramics,” Seidl said. “I’ve grown worried about my energy use, and kilns require so much. My past work started to seem a little wasteful, so I wanted to get to the point of making art more sustainably.”

“Fungi Fantasy” has also been something of a departure for Holyoke, who favors traditional oil painting as her preferred medium.

“I’m pretty new to crocheting, but I’ve been learning how to make all kinds of cool stuff and technical tricks to make different shapes,” she said. “We’re both learning a lot.”

Seidl and Holyoke's "Fungi Fantasy/Looking" will be on display in the center of the Vernet Ecological Center through spring — or perhaps until it starts growing actual fungus, Glen Helen Outreach Manager Lori Freeman joked with the News.

The artist reception to meet and greet Seidl and Holyoke, and to learn more about their installation, will be held Sunday, Nov. 19, 3:30-5 p.m., in the Vernet building. Light refreshments will be provided.

Topics: Glen Helen Nature Preserve