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Top Stories

Synthesizing art, space and science

DEBORAH ALLARD-BERNARDI , Herald News Staff Reporter 08/29/2004

FALL RIVER -- Fifty yards of textile fabric, entwined in wire and symbolism, now decorate a large, previously cold space at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Advanced Technology and Manufacturing Center on Martine Street.

Local artist Victoria Mathiesen and her assistant, Kim Gatesman, a UMass fine arts student from Dartmouth, were charged with the task of brightening up the area above the entrance of the building -- 45 feet above the floor.

The frighteningly high space is accessible only by commercial ladder -- or hydraulic lift, which the artists used Wednesday morning to affix the textile sculpture to the ceiling.

Surrounded by windows, the area is open and white, and was ready for a splash of color, according to Mathiesen.

"It needs to be monumental. It can't be small. It would get lost," said Mathiesen.

The mammoth textile pieces, which were all donated by Quaker Fabric Corp., are in blue and gold -- the college's colors, as well as red, green, a muted, natural print that resembles sound waves, and a bright, diagonal design.

"I wanted to use warm colors," said Mathiesen.

The top five pieces of fabric are to represent the five strategic priorities of the building, as seen by its director.

The design is vertical so as not to chop up the large space, but instead work with the building's architecture. "I didn't want to destroy its beauty," said Mathiesen.

Gatesman designed the metal and glass sculptures that dangle off the bottom of the textile.

Light dances off the blue glass stones, which symbolize the water that powered the old city mills and the raindrops that fall into the Watuppa River

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nearby. Any small amount of air circulation sends the copper wire sculptures bouncing.

"How I see a piece of art is what it can mean in a space like this," said Mathiesen. "It represents how the textile industry started: steel and water."

Thomas Curry, director of the Advanced Technology and Manufacturing Center, saw Mathiesen's work at the Cherry & Webb building, where Mathiesen has organized an ongoing art exhibit in the lobby.

Her designs, using prints of old city photos and Quaker fabrics, struck him personally. "My grandfather worked in the textile mills," said Curry.

Curry thought adding a bit of the city's past could do wonders for his building too.

"It's a beautiful building, but barren and sterile," said Curry. "It need(ed) something."

Watching Mathiesen work, Curry said she spent time at the building at different times of day, watching the sun float across the sky and shine through certain windows, and on walls. She also watched what people did in the building.

Then, Mathiesen presented her artist renderings to Curry. Mathiesen didn't gravitate far from her initial idea to hang long pieces of fabric above the lobby, and Curry loved it.

"Everyone's excited," he said. "Here, we're creating things at the site of a 19th century textile mill. We're tying the future with the economic past of the city."

Curry said Mathiesen's creation and symbolism "makes a connection between going forward and all the great things the city did in the past."

Rocks from the Watuppa River will be placed beneath the fabric sculpture when it is completed. Each rock will represent an entity in the building, said Mathiesen.


Mathiesen is also working on Phase II of the project, which will be to hang five huge lengths of Quaker fabric from the ceiling in the center of the lobby. Other sculptures are in the works for the ground floor, too.

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