Resurrecting Big Mary
ETSU art project to honor elephant Big Mary, bring healing

This has been a big week at ETSU’s Art Annex. Literally. Elephantine.

Since Saturday and through Saturday, Sept. 13, printmaker/artist Dennis McNett, known for his woodcut prints from modern skateboard culture, folk tales and Nordic lore, has been working with ETSU art students to create a piece of art inspired by the controversial hanging in Erwin of Big Mary the elephant from 1916.

“This is by no means an attempt to dredge up old stories or point fingers,” McNett says. “It is to change a negative to a positive, reflect on society as a whole, reflect on the not-so-well-played media then and now and counter a horrible ceremony of the past with a cleansing ceremony of the future.”

The Houston-based artist and students are constructing a life-size – 13- by 18- by 7-foot – Asian elephant sculpture that, McNett says, “represents the resurrected spirit of Big Mary” that will be covered with “skin” made from McNett’s screen print patterns. Other art students have been crafting masks to be worn during a “happening” Saturday in the ETSU Quad at 7:30 p.m. The happening is open to the public as spectators or participants.

McNett is gathering volunteers to participate in a procession through campus to the Quad, a slow New Orleans funeral walk down to the Quad where things will get more upbeat, he says, and the ceremony will become a celebration of cleansing.

The ceremony will not include any re-enactment of the events in Erwin, but instead will focus on “the reflection and resolution that art can bring to old wounds,” says Anita DeAngelis, director of Mary B. Martin School of the Arts, sponsor for the residency.

“The idea of resurrecting Big Mary gives us a few minutes to reflect on how we act as humans – the ugly side of capitalism is in play, the abuse of media is in play which carries over to now,” McNett says. “Plus it’s an excuse to do something and have fun with something you are not being graded on.”

McNett often travels to differing locales and integrates local narratives into public art projects and events. “For several years I have made up my own mythology revolving around the Wolfbat character,” says McNett, whose website is www.wolfbat.com. “When asked to do artist visits, projects or shows, I will often try to find an interesting story or local folklore to make a sort of myth soup of. For this visit to ETSU, the Wolfbat tribe will be migrating to the area to cleanse any residual bad energy and dark clouds left behind from the execution of Mary.”

McNett and tribe have been in San Francisco and at Indiana State University in recent weeks, and after ETSU, he says, he will work with students at Rhode Island School of Design. “I have done dozens of these types of residencies,” McNett says. “Most of these visits have been centered around working collaboratively with a group of students/participants. We are primarily working toward a performative happening with positive intent based around a story.”
The public and performance aspects of the ETSU project are particularly exciting, says ETSU Department of Art and Design professor Ralph Slatton, who recommended McNett’s residency. “We’ve done public performances [with art at ETSU] but it is very innovative for printmaking to have such a large visibility,” Slatton says. “Prints are something you put in a frame, a precious object you’ve spent months on. Here you have a lot of planning and huge concepts, bringing a lot of people together in this ritualistic performance but at the same time paying homage to a very old tradition of printmaking.”

The collaborative process is also an important aspect in this kind of public art project, McNett says. “It’s an opportunity to participate in something that is collaborative,” the artist says. “What the students can get out of this is that they can see in short amount of time with a lot of people you can get something like this done. It’s amazing what can be accomplished when people start to collaborate and work as a unit. There’s this synergy when they start bouncing ideas off each other.”

After the ceremony and the end of the residency, the Big Mary sculpture will either reside on campus or at the Natural History Museum and Gray Fossil Site, DeAngelis says, where it can be viewed and enjoyed by the public.

For information about the Big Mary happening or ETSU Mary B. Martin School of the Arts, call 423-439-TKTS (8587) or visit www.etsu.edu/martin. “Like” ETSU Mary B. Martin School of the Arts on Facebook and follow it on Twitter and Instagram @ArtsAtETSU.