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**Art by the People for the People**  
*ETSU public art project to honor infamous elephant Big Mary*  

JOHNSON CITY (September 2, 2014) – The Mary B. Martin School of the Arts at East Tennessee State University is hoping to repeat the success of fall 2013 by starting its fall 2014 season with another on-campus public art project. From Sept. 6-13, printmaker Dennis McNett, known for his woodcut prints from modern skateboard culture, folk tales and Nordic lore, will work with 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.”

When he arrives, the Brooklyn-based artist will begin working with ETSU art and design students and volunteers to construct a life-size Asian elephant sculpture that, McNett says, “will represent the resurrected spirit of Big Mary.” They then will create screen print patterns to cover the structure, benefiting from the resident artist’s expertise and vision.

On Wednesday, Sept. 10, at 7 p.m., McNett will give a presentation on his work and this project in Ball Hall Room 127. This artist talk is free and open to the public and will be followed by a reception in Slocumb Galleries. Finally, on Saturday, Sept. 13, at 7:30 p.m., the public will be invited to participate in an outdoor ceremony/happening, featuring the finished sculpture, in the ETSU Campus Quad between Ball Hall and Campus Centre Building.

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.

ETSU Department of Art and Design professor Ralph Slatton recommended McNett as a visiting artist. “I’ve known him for quite a while,” Slatton says. “In printmaking, we’re kind of a small group … Dennis would be one of the more outspoken ones and one of the most visible ones. His images demand a lot of the attention from the public.”

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.”

Screen and relief printing are intended to carry messages, DeAngelis says. “Prints are meant to be in people’s hands and that’s the kind of the approach Dennis takes,” says DeAngelis, also a printmaker and Art and Design faculty member. “He has chosen to take his work out to the world in a different way. So it’s interesting to me that we are able to bring someone to connect with our students and our community so directly.”

The public and performance aspects of the project are particularly exciting, Slatton says. “We’ve done public performances [with art at ETSU] but it is very innovative for printmaking to have such a large visibility,” he 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.”

Slatton’s students are equally excited about having the “rising star” on campus for eight days. “We’ve got a lot of responses so far to the opportunity to work on the project,” says Slatton, whose Screen Process class will be heavily involved. “We’ve got some devotees of Dennis McNett. Dennis is someone I personally get a lot of inspiration from. The students, I think, are always looking for chances to push the boundaries of art. Dennis will offer a great opportunity for them to break out beyond the frame of the gallery, so to speak.”

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 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.