A New Life

Artist to share her transformational vision for found objects

When shoes, skates, chairs, suitcases and toys get old, rusted and battered, most people throw them away. This is when North Carolina artist Janet Orselli finds objects the most beautiful and inspiring.

Wooden shoe molds attach to violin heads and rusty metal roller skates, creating something else entirely. Chicken wishbones become adornments for old leather suitcases. Mattress springs, bird and wasp nests, wooden crutches and dress form mannequins find new lives and purpose in Orselli’s carefully staged installations and studio.

While sculptors start with a lump of clay or a painter with paint and a blank canvas, Orselli begins with items that have already had one life and are poised for another. She finds her raw materials, she says, in “dark spider webby attic corners, inside boxes hidden in the basement, or in the junk pile down the street.”

“For me, these found objects are very precious – especially today when less and less of these older items are around to be found,” she says. “There are so many things being sold that are plastic, that don’t have a history, that have not been passed down from generations that weren’t made by hand ...”

“Part of the history of the objects is that they have been handled by so many people and that they were cherished. They have an energy within them that was instilled by the maker of the object, as well as the people that used it.”

While she won’t be toting her usual trove of creations, Orselli will bring her “reverence for cast-off objects” to ETSU to share in a lecture Oct. 6 as part of The DeVault Tavern Exhibition series of events. She will show slides of her installations and found object work in a wide variety of venues. Orselli’s talk, “Lost or Found? Giving Found Objects A New Life,” will start at 7 p.m. in ETSU’s Ball Hall, room 127, with a reception to follow in Slocumb Galleries.

The DeVault Tavern Exhibition features photographs by Paul Kennedy, a former Jonesborough native and now-New York artist, and items found in the two-story brick tavern, a historic landmark on the old stagecoach route that ran through Leesburg, Tenn., about 5 miles west of Jonesborough.
“We thought Janet Orselli would be the perfect person to speak to the value and possibilities of the many found objects in The DeVault Tavern Exhibition that is on display in Reece Museum through December,” says Randy Sanders, interim director of Reece Museum. “The exhibition includes not only photos, but furniture, ledgers, letters, census forms and maps. We have invited Janet to help us understand how important these kinds of memorabilia can be.”

Installation art is a genre that isn’t as familiar to people as other types of art, says exhibition co-sponsor Anita DeAngelis, director of Mary B. Martin School of the Arts. “Janet Orselli’s work invites the audience to step into and experience first-hand, and she uses found objects to evoke a particular sense of space,” DeAngelis says. “The kind of work she completes is closely related to the manner in which the DeVault Tavern exhibition was conceived, curated and installed.”

Orselli’s installations and smaller pieces – which have been exhibited in the Carolinas, New York, Arkansas, Illinois, Montana and as distantly as Germany – have been called “whimsical, haunting” and “surprising.”

There is no surprise there for Orselli, who also teaches art at Spartanburg Community College, across the border in South Carolina. There is, however, a lot of fun and discovery – even with something as ordinary as a well-worn chair.

“I collect a lot of chairs,” she says. “Chairs are perfect. I’ve attached all kinds of things to them. A chair doesn’t have to remain a chair if we can be open in how we look at it and be aware of how our perception guides and creates the ‘meaning’ we find. I attempt, through my work, to create a wider perspective on the world and how we interpret things in the world …

“The real thing I hope people will get from my talk – is a way to get in touch with whatever they are passionate about, whatever has real meaning for them and what they can bring of themselves to join with others to create a better world,” she says. “My way of doing it – no doubt – will be very different than theirs, but we have to begin with what we love!

“Hopefully talking about what I love will connect with others and bring awareness as to what they love – not that it has to be art, found objects or anything remotely like that.”

For more information about The DeVault Tavern Exhibition and its events, visit www.etsu.edu/cass/reece or call 423-439-4392.

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