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Bemis Buddy



Andrea Loeffke reflects on Omaha's twisters, art

Editor's note: this story is the first in an occasional series profiling artists living and working in Omaha, whether they're visitors, artists-in-residence or lifelong Nebraskans.

by Lindsay Trapnell

After her three-month stint as a resident at Omaha's Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, German-born artist Andrea Loeffke has an addition to her long list of accomplishments: surviving her first tornado.

When one of this summer's strong storms hit, she was outside, taking a look at the cloud moving quickly toward the Bemis Center.

"It came so fast and so intense and suddenly we were right in the middle of it," Loeffke said. "I was running for my life. I was really afraid."

Loeffke retreated into the Bemis unscathed, but was stranded inside when 13th and Leavenworth flooded.

Besides the awe-inspiring weather, Omaha offered Loeffke a much-needed respite from the hectic pace of her life in Brooklyn, New York. In New York, Loeffke creates art, teaches at the Pratt Institute and holds a part-time job. The hectic schedule combined with life in a big city can be draining, she said.

During her Bemis residency, Loeffke said she didn't have to worry about paying rent, and found the slower pace of life in Omaha refreshing.

"I realized how stressed I was back in New York and it was so nice for me to be here," she said. "I felt so relaxed. To have nothing else to do but make your art is amazing."



While at Bemis, Loeffke worked primarily on drawings, something she says she rarely finds time to do since she is predominantly a sculpture and mixed media installation artist. The installation process is so time consuming that she often goes from one project site to the next.

Loeffke's work is meticulously composed, with great attention to color and texture. The viewer could think a lot of time is spent in the conceptual and planning stages, but her process is organic and simple.

"I find things that I find interesting, accumulate things around myself and then start playing with them. I get inspired by simple things, not necessarily complicated thought," she said.

The playfulness Loeffke describes is reflected in the whimsy that permeates her pieces. She often doesn't know where a piece is headed, she said, and finds the journey exhilarating. In many of her installations, Loeffke creates an environment encouraging viewers to participate and feel a thrill of discovery similar to her own.

In "The squirrels, hedgehogs, and rabbits are indeed harmless," Loeffke built a deer stand replica in the middle of an installation of mixed media miniature clusters and placed binoculars atop the stand. The viewer is invited to climb the stand and search the almost exclusively green room with the binoculars, illuminating miniature text, photos, and small-scale minutia tucked around the room. These separate pieces become ambiguous clues that could be fashioned into a narrative.

Her work is fantastical, yet grounded in physical reality. It usually mixes dark, foreboding elements amongst the mostly sweet exteriors — traits that seem at odds with each other.

Loeffke is moving more toward interactive pieces, like the recent "Andrea's Home Sweet Home + Cooking Session," a project that welcomed visitors to eat, cook, draw, and water vegetables with her — but she also embraces two-dimensional work, like the drawings on her studio walls. One of the strongest on display featured a mass of menacing clouds with dripping, ominous black paint hovering over a flock of fluorescent birds.

Loeffke has returned to New York, perhaps pinning this same image to her city walls, a reminder of her stormy Midwest summer.

German artist Andrea Loeffke was a resident at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts through early August. To see more of her work, including some pieces created in Omaha, visit her website, andrealoeffke.com.

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