

North Dakota Museum of Art

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Brian Lofthus
blofthus@ndmoa.com
701-777-4195

Consummate Philosopher and Technician Extraordinaire Lena McGrath Welker Opens the exhibition “Navigation [chime]” at the North Dakota Museum of Art

Portland, Oregon artist Lena McGrath Welker has spent the last six years toiling away on her exhibition that will fill the galleries of the North Dakota Museum of Art from November 6 through January 9, 2011.

In 2004, the artist showed four bodies of work in the Museum from her on-going Navigation Series. At that time, Museum Director Laurel Reuter invited her to return with the final installation in this, her major lifework. Twelve years in the making, the Navigation series concludes with [chime], opening on Saturday evening, November 6 from 5 – 7 pm. The artist will be in Grand Forks and speak about her work at 6 pm.

The overarching theme of the Navigation series, both in the 2004 exhibition and in the current show, addresses ways of thinking about the accumulation and transmission of knowledge and wisdom. What gives written language its power? In what ways does language fail us, and in what ways does it allow communication to take place?

Moving through her studio during these intervening years have been hundreds of pounds of alabaster waiting to be carved, recently-cast porcelain scrolls, weavings perpetually rolling off two looms, fabric collages, huge pastel and silver leaf paintings, stacks of glass, and on and on. Since returning home in 2004, Welker has learned to carve alabaster, to add the making of soft-ground etchings to her repertoire of printmaking skills, and to master historical bookbinding techniques including traditional Coptic, longstitch, tackets, accordion methods. And always, her work is interwoven with drawing.

The pace of her work, however, has been determined by her health. Since that first North Dakota show, she was diagnosed with a non-malignant brain tumor. In December of 2006, she was treated with a relatively new gamma-knife radiation procedure intended to buy time for the artist— five, ten, or even fifteen years. Yet there are days she cannot work, bound to her bed with fierce headaches.

When asked about the results of the treatment, Welker says, “Unfortunately, it would be reasonable to say the gamma-knife radiation did not exactly agree with me. I lost one-third of my body weight (which had been a healthy weight for my height and bone structure), developed dyslexia, and continue to suffer one-to-three crushing headaches a week. Lately, I have been falling more and the falls are more serious (the first dislocated and fractured my tailbone; the most recent fall resulted in a concussion and coma). My kids, now in their twenties, are so scared of losing me. I just want to finish this project before I have to have the surgery, which I know will come eventually. I don’t do very well with anesthetic, and of course now the tumor has scar tissue, which complicates matters.”

Even while living with a brain tumor, she has continued to develop her craft skills, relying upon fabricators and assistants for help with the large work, especially steel fabricator Jim Schmidt, also of Portland. For example, three hundred stainless steel stands support the floating, porcelain, wordless books of Navigation [sea change], created to fill the mezzanine gallery. Welker tested and tested

North Dakota Museum of Art

until she found the finest, whitest, most translucent porcelain on the market and then applied silver and palladium leaf to the surfaces to suggest the glint of sunlight on the ocean.

In the alcove of the upstairs gallery, the viewer will find [chart] with small stacks of incised glass tablets. They are accompanied by vitrines filled with hand-dyed, indigo folios embellished with drawings and stitched imagery of what appear to be arcane maps. Floating above them are huge drawings incorporating Ptolemy's diagrams, star measurements, constellations, abstract counting marks, the geometry of navigation systems, signs and symbols from Greek mathematical texts, and scanned images of deep-sky nebulae.

Welker was helped along by a fellowship from the Wyoming Ucross Foundation Residency where she made the fabric collages. The EM-Space Book Arts Center in Portland provided her with a sealed studio for carving alabaster. As the work progressed, she received key grants from the Oregon Arts Commission, the Pollock Krasner Foundation, and two project grants from the Regional Arts and Culture Council, all to buy materials and help to realize specific works such as [flight] and [sea change] and [stillness].

The sixteen-foot high, steel skeleton for a dovecote anchors [flight] in the west gallery of the main floor, the inside of which will be skinned with translucent paper. The dovecote is home to funerary urns, blackened bronze and copper begging bowls resting on a low slate wall, and 120 often-blank, bound books stacked on the floor. Accompanying the dovecote are some 3,000, nine-inch fabric squares, each having either a single feather attached, or stitching that conveys a sense of writing or counting. They hang from the ceiling beams on fine thread, like Tibetan prayer flags. The feathers represent ideas as the Greeks first conceived them.

Repetition abounds throughout the Museum echoing the repetition of the mantra in meditation, of reoccurring themes in a musical composition, of sewing and weaving and chanting, of waves rolling across a vast ocean.

In the east gallery and hovering just above the floor is an empty organdy room made from bolts of cotton fabric donated by the Pennsylvania company Testfabrics. This centerpiece for the installation [stillness] is surrounded by eight, fifteen-foot, vertical, paper scrolls drawn with dry pigment and graphite. Beneath them are rows of alabaster cairns and small porcelain scrolls.

Navigation [affinis] consists of thirty prints embedded in handmade abaca paper, hanging on steel frames in the space between the east and west galleries. Their images connect [flight] in the west to [stillness] in the east.

The artist named the exhibition "Navigation [chime]" because "chime has poetic and musical derivation, but it also refers to a system in which all the parts are in harmony, showing a correspondence of proportion or relation." The artist imagines her wordless books as "a continuation of ancient books still with us, so carefully and beautifully bound, with folios of handmade paper, their words so arcane and unintelligible to us now as to disappear from the page."

Underpinning all of Lena Welker's work is her response to grief and death. The artist has experienced a lifetime of loss. For example, from 1988 to 1996, she endured multiple losses. "While raising two infants, I suffered a second miscarriage, lost my twin to brain cancer, my younger brother to AIDS, my father-in-law to liver cancer, my mother to suicide, my father to lung cancer, and my step-mother to a massive stroke."

North Dakota Museum of Art

In the exhibition, Welker deals with uncertainty in an abstract and liminal way. She invites people to move through silence. She suggests the accumulation of experience through the physical massing of repetitive objects and motifs, and, finally, emptying out, as colors fade into transparency and words disappear. The transitions from gallery to gallery are equally subtle and connected. Because she uses mostly translucent materials, people are able to experience the work privately, while being aware of the community of others.

According to the artist, "Many of the materials are light enough to move with the ambient air currents, and with people walking by. People respond to this movement with a 'bodily' intelligence, instinctively becoming quiet and walking more slowly. As sunlight pours through the windows and warms the rooms, the scents of silk and indigo are released."

The North Dakota Museum of Art is located on Centennial Drive on the University of North Dakota campus. The Museum hours are weekdays from 9 am to 5 pm and weekends from 1 pm to 5 pm. The Museum Shop is open during these hours. There is no general admission for viewing exhibitions, visiting the Museum Shop or the Museum Café.