New Downtown Florence art exhibit explores artistic obsession

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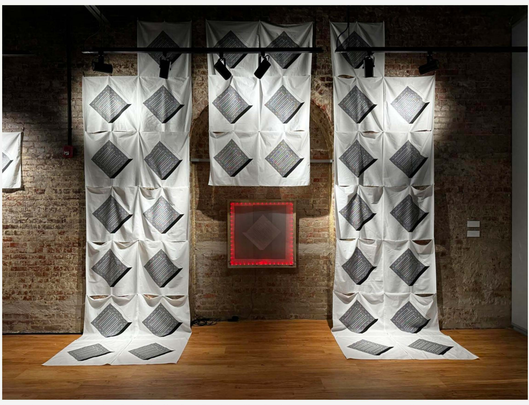
JAN 30, 2024



Codependency — a collaboration between Tamara LaValla, Myles Calvert, Drew Heffron + Wesley Fry — features cloths screen printed with black cubes. Here, they surround the screen used for the printing, which is lit with LED lights.
TAMARA LAVALLA/PROVIDED

FLORENCE – "WANT MORE" — Myles Calvert and Tamara LaValla's new Florence art exhibit — is a study in making art as much as it is a study in the art itself.

On the surface, the work appears subdued, even minimalist. Hues of black, white and gray dominate. Form is the focal point — simple, gently curving lines with little ornamentation. Dozens of small concrete vessels, for example. A burnt oak bench.

Yet beneath the surface lies a years-worth of work: hundreds of hours spent in the studio, countless iterations of the same idea, a compulsion to go a little further, add another layer to the piece.

"There's this obsessive, intense, all-consuming passion and energy," LaValla said. "But it doesn't express itself in this maximalist way. Actually, all of that sort of gets funneled quite precisely."

That's part of the premise of "WANT MORE," featured at the Gately Gallery in downtown Florence through March 7.

The two artists described the exhibit as a collection of obsessive, ritualistic, indulgent pieces that lean heavily on technique, dedicated line quality and a meticulous process.

The gallery features art from the past two years and from a wide swath of disciplines — video to screen printing to sculpture. On one wall sits a 26-minute video of a flickering candle. On another, white cloths hang, each printed with the same black cube.

Vessel Form is a work by Myles Calvert made with copper plate etchings on paper.
TAMARA LAVALLA/PROVIDED

The diversity of designs was part of the appeal for the gallery, said Dawn Fenimore, the gallery coordinator. Owned and operated by Francis Marion University, Gately Gallery selects five exhibits to show each year. "WANT MORE" is the first of 2024.

The submission from Calvert and LaValla differed from recent selections, Fenimore said. Many recent exhibits have focused on two-dimensional work, while "WANT MORE" embraced a variety of materials and techniques.

"It really just brought a different texture to the gallery than we've had before," she said.

The exhibit is built on the friendship between Calvert and LaValla, both professors at Winthrop University in Rock Hill.

Originally from a town north of Toronto, Canada, Calvert is an associate professor of fine arts with a focus on printmaking.

LaValla – who is originally from New York – spent much of her life as a graphic designer, only recently moving into the fine arts field. She is an instructor of art and design at Winthrop.

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Working together for "WANT MORE" was a bit like a trust fall, LaValla said. The two artists knew each other well enough to know they liked each other, but not well enough to know what would happen under the bright lights of a year-long artistic process.

The partnership worked well, Calvert and LaValla ultimately agreed while bantering during a Zoom interview. Together, they balanced each other's strengths and weaknesses and discovered new artistic pathways that effectively fused their voices.

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"WANT MORE" embraces an artists' desire to push their work to the next level, they said, exploring the lengths that compulsion can take you.

Take "Satisfyingly Objectified."

The sculpture consists of dozens of small concrete vessels resting on rectangular pedestals. Beneath the five pedestals lies a screen print made with plaster. The intricate design appears like dust against the gallery floor. Each of the screen printed designs is composed of the vessels' silhouettes layered on top of each other.

In creating the piece, Calvert and LaValla started with dozens of different forms to use for the vessels, narrowing it down to four. They created molds for each and began making concrete copies. As an extra layer, they dipped each vessel in wax.

They repeated this process over and over again, making well over 200 different vessels by the end.

"It became obsessive and over the top, and I'm all over that and that feeds into the whole theme of 'WANT MORE,'" Calvert said.

Satisfyingly Objectified is a sculptural work that combines sculpture and screen printing. Myles Calvert and Tamara LaValla created hundreds of small concrete vessels for the piece.
TAMARA LAVALLA/PROVIDED

Both artists are process-driven. The final work is almost irrelevant, LaValla said. What's important to her is the act of making art, the questions and stories that emerge during its creation.

Much of that meaning is hidden beneath the surface, something Calvert and LaValla both readily admit. While the artwork contains depth, it won't be evident to many of the viewers. They're perfectly fine with that.

"There comes a point where you're like, this doesn't mean nearly as much to anyone as it does to me," LaValla said. "... But I think that's what I try to teach my students all the time, too. Like, if you don't care about your work, no one's gonna care about your work. If you're not gonna get excited about it, no one's gonna get excited about it."

Gately Gallery — located at 142 N. Dargan St. — is open Tuesday and Wednesday from noon to 6 p.m., Thursday and Friday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and the second and fourth Saturdays of the month from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Calvert and LaValla will host an artists' talk at 5:30 p.m. March 7.

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