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An Artist's Vision for the Community

By Mark Svetz

Professor June Bisantz has a vision of art meeting people in the community, where they can see and enjoy it while they live, work and play.

"Galleries are great," Bisantz says. "But I am engaged with the idea of reaching out to the widest possible audience, where they don't have to make special arrangements. Art comes to them in their world."

Bisantz is a member of the Eastern Connecticut State University faculty in the Fine Arts Department, where she teaches digital art and design. Her vision has brightened the landscape of Eastern Connecticut for several years as she brings her own work and that of her students out into the community.

She talks about art making every aspect of our lives a little brighter, a little more interesting and a lot more fun. For Bisantz, the idea of this relationship – between the artist and viewer – taking place on the viewer's turf, so to speak, is important. In the streets, or parking lots; on the highways or in movie theaters, Bisantz likes to give people art, where they can view it in the comfort and security of their everyday lives.

One of her current works, in progress, is called "Standing Ovation." Bisantz has proposed to install an "applause button," at certain street corners in Willimantic. A passerby who pushed the "applause button," would be greeted with a round of applause, as Bisantz puts it, "simply because I had shown up on this

street corner in this particular town where so many special people live, work and walk every day."

Her web site announces the "demonstration model is in!" and Bisantz hopes to get approval from the town, and money from grants to pay for the installation. The celebration of being human that is implied in this work is a common theme for Bisantz. She loves the idea of getting a round of applause just for being human in this place and time.

She has had a handful of major public art projects. Among them was "5 Easy Steps!!" a series she describes as an "infomercial on billboards." This project began with the idea of a "Burma Shave-style trail of billboards," according to Bisantz' web site (www.junebisantzevans.com).

"START HERE," the first in the series proclaims. It continues with "TAKE ACTION," and then "DON'T PANIC," followed by "BE MARVELOUS," and the final billboard shows a smiling and triumphant Bisantz. "CLAIM YOUR PRIZE!!!" she is saying.

The five billboards, each with a photo of Bisantz on it, appeared in the Willimantic area in 2004. The designs were also placed on buses and, as billboards, in and around North Adams, MA, the site of Mass MoCa (the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art), one of Bisantz' favorite art museums. The journey from Willimantic to North Adams was important to her, but more important was the concept of following "5 Easy Steps," to reach any goal.

"5 Easy Steps" was up when Sarah and I returned to live in Willimantic after 10 years in Manhattan. I think the message of the billboards, with nothing to sell but hope, inspiration and what Bisantz describes as the "willingness to believe in simple solutions" spoke to us.

The simple affirmation of self, shown in these billboards seemed to say we might, after all, be on the right path.

"Directions for Use," was the title of an installation in New Haven, CT. It included the familiar shapes and colors of highway and street signs with a different message. The signs advise us to "CELEBRATE," or "MEET HERE." Others remind us to "LISTEN," and "LOOK." While yet another encourages us to "DANCE." In other words, I think, "Be human," or "celebrate yourself."

Another way in which Bisantz brings art to the public is by getting

assignments for her classes at ECSU to prepare billboards or advertisements for local groups and businesses. These mini-internships, as I think of them, give the students an experience that cannot be duplicated in the classroom or on the computer.

Recently, Sarah and I got to see, up close, how this works. Bisantz' Graphic Arts III class was assigned to design a display for the four front windows of our shop. The students interviewed us, asking questions and listening carefully as we tried to articulate our philosophy as well as our hopes and dreams for our business.

The class was divided into groups and each group prepared a proposal, including specific details about constructing the displays. We attended a presentation in Shaefer Hall. The work astounded us. These presentations were beautiful, fun, colorful and professional. The students, it was clear, had really listened to us!

Their work reflected our passion for hemp and organic fabrics, our commitment to a sustainable economy that supports and is supported by the local community, even our love of rich colors. Our ideas were beautifully illustrated in the work of these students.

And they included plans to construct the displays for no more than \$25 a

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Mike DeFazio, Michelle Cunningham and Hanna Shea, students in June Bisantz' Graphic Arts III class at ECSU, install window displays at Clothworks, a shop at 31 Church Street in Willimantic. Dale DaRos also worked on the design. (June Bisantz photo)

window! Our philosophy and our pocketbooks require a low budget! They even called for reused and recycled materials when they could!

"They have to get into your philosophy," Bisantz says of the work her students do in the community. "They have to come up with a design to help (the community client) articulate their mission. They not only get challenged by the design work, but they get to see and appreciate what people are doing in the community."

In our case, we were especially lucky. One group of students wanted to follow through on the designs and create the window displays in our shop. Michelle Cunningham, Hanna Shea, Mike DeFazio and Dale DaRos used digital media, natural and found objects to turn their design proposal into "public art."

"We usually work on a computer screen. It's great to find someone in the community, like you, with a place to do art!" Shea said of the experience. "It's great actually working with a client. Clients have a budget, and that's a challenge. The client's goals are different from the teacher's or the school's goals. A teacher might say 'That's great work for you!' but, a client has real needs."

Shea is taking her studies to England this semester. She will be in London, studying at the *Central St. Martin's School of Art and Design*. Even as she anticipates that adventure, she was excited about the four windows she designed in Downtown Willimantic. "I've been driving by with my friends whenever I get the chance, just to show off the windows!"

"The point is, I think, for them (the students) to see design used in the world," Bisantz says. "To think through the problems that come up only in the real world. It's one thing to say we want to have panels hanging, but here we had to figure out how to hang them, and how to fabricate them. It's a multipart project."

Whether she is pursuing her own muse, or leading students into the world to make their art in the community, Bisantz is following her vision of art informing, amusing, entertaining, inspiring, relaxing or, in some other way, making people feel special. It is a special gift, Bisantz has, and our community is richer for it.

Mark Svetz and Sarah Winter own Clothworks, in Willimantic, where they make and sell clothing and bags.