Reused, Recycled, and Remembered: Collaboration with Steven and William Ladd

By Sarah L. Mason

Nineteenth century painter and sculptor Edgar Degas once said, “Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.” For brothers Steven and William Ladd, that concept rings true on many dimensions throughout their work. Their current exhibition, Mary Queen of the Universe, is an innovative installation now on display at the MDCC Museum of Art + Design that is a testimony to Degas’ conception not only because of its unique construction, backstory, and overall appearance, but also because of its place as the centerpiece of an inspirational children’s program that they have used as a platform to share their art and vision with the world for many years.

The magnitude of Mary Queen of the Universe is defined in its scale, at approximately 10,000 square feet, its vast magnificence can be found in the intricacies, delicately and precisely placed to comprise the work. It includes over 150 objects, many composed of recycled materials—collected, rolled and trimmings, creating different "scrolls". Often they fill handmade boxes with the scrolls, forming a "scroll landscape," a term describing meaningful materials arranged in a beautiful way.

Mary Queen of the Universe is a part of a larger collection of work that developed from gathering shared memories and using them as titles. For MQU, they used large landscapes to explore the idea of these themes. For example, one gallery features multiple large scale prints of aunts because of a very early childhood memory the brothers share. They opened up red box they found, and an explosion of black carpenter ants started running around and poured out into the room. For Steven and William, the visual, emotional, and tactile experience remained imprinted in their minds as a vivid memory. They explored the idea by printing 116,000 ants on 8 1/2 x 11 sheets of paper.

This impressive installation which the public may visit for free at the MDCC Museum of Art + Design is tied to Scrollathon, their engagement program which started when a friend and art teacher in St. Louis invited them to teach her students about their art. From the classroom, it snowballed into a two-week event that 1,000 children get to take part in. And, when they introduced the idea of Scrollathon, it was their values they had in mind.

"Spend your life doing what you love. Be focused and disciplined. Collaborate. C," is the mantra that guides them. With Scrollathon, Steven and William work with local children, many of whom are underprivileged and may not otherwise often be exposed to art. They teach the children how to make their own work of art. This provides them with experience not only with art but also ownership. They are able to create something they can take home. They collaborate to make a larger work of art together while the Ladd brothers document the process and use the photographs (with permission, of course) on their website, giving the children involved the experience of being part of something larger.

"It’s amazing that this started in 2006 at a workshop," said Steven. "It has been about sharing our core values since then.

Like the brothers have been working on art together for sixteen years, they both have a very independent relationship with their work, even the work they produce together: What one does, the other doesn’t, and vice versa, then everything gets fused together in the final piece. They also reach out to other collaborators to help spread their ideas and produce something great together.

For more information about Steven and William, Mary Queen of the Universe, and Scrollathon, visit stevenandwilliam.com. Or, go straight to the source and visit the MDCC Museum of Art + Design to see the collaborative, memory-infused installation for yourself.