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TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Portions of Harriet Cherry Cheney's "Receptacle Project" at the Blue Door Gallery

Artist fills canisters with hope and healing

By Patricia Robert

"This is a traumatic time we're all going through, and it connects us," said Dobbs Ferry artist Harriet Cherry Cheney. "We must remain positive, and I firmly believe in the power of art to heal."

Cheney, 69, was discussing the pandemic and her "Receptacle Project," a three-dimensional, mixed media work on view in Yonkers at "The 2021 Blue Door Artist Members Exhibition, Celebrating 20 Years of Creativity and Community," now through Aug. 28.

The piece consists of 34 cylindrical Quaker Oats canisters, each covered with textile swatches woven or sewn in colors that are interconnected. Several have beading. All contain positive messages, many sent to Cheney via P.O. Box 117 in Ardsley. She has no intention to either read or count the messages.

As she states on her website: "I plan to continue making and filling the receptacles as long as I keep receiving messages." One thing she does intend to do, however, is to find better ways of soliciting even more messages, including more word of mouth. Told of the project, Cheney's hairdresser offered to ask all her customers to participate.

As to how society will emerge from an era of disruption, anxiety, and fear, "Either we'll rise above it — like we did after 9/11 — or we'll go back into our caves," Cheney observed. "I don't know. But I do know it is possible to keep going on, to keep our ears open, to exchange ideas — to connect."

"Everything gets back to connection — that is the challenge of art, and what can be difficult to achieve: that everything works together," Cheney added. "I'll admit that I am happiest when I am working with my hands, sitting on the floor, surrounded by all my swatches of fabrics and other items, many of them given to me by friends. I feel like I am 8 years old again."

The pandemic made supplies harder to find, which contributed to Cheney's discovery of the Quaker Oats canisters.

"I had finished a piece influenced by the pandemic, and I found that I enjoyed working in the round," she said. "Maybe it was that, or maybe it's because I'm from Philadelphia, and the word 'Quaker' spoke to me. And it was easy to find. Of course, I now have bags and bags of uneaten oatmeal in the freezer."

It was at Philadelphia's University of the Arts that Cheney earned a bachelor of fine arts in painting. She also studied at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and at American University in Washington, D.C. She is a member of the Textile Study Group of New York, and a juried member of the Studio Art Quilt Associates. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally.

Cheney believes that almost everything in her body of work has been influenced first by nature, and then by her subconscious memory of her Jewish-Ukrainian-Latvian/Russian family — her grandparents and, in particular, her father, Herbert Cherry.

"I was most definitely a 'Daddy's girl' and I took his death in 2011 very hard,"

Cheney said. "But it was when he became very ill in 2008 that the door opened for me to fiber art. I had been surrounded by fabric all my life. My grandmothers sewed. One of my grandfathers sewed."

"I was studying at the Rockland Center for the Arts in Nyack. A very good friend suggested that I make a memory quilt, in the Amish style, using bits and pieces in squares that represented my father, his ideas and interests," Cheney continued. "And that is what I did. As his factory made jackets, I used fabric from jackets. He'd been an Eagle Scout and served in World War II, so I found symbols for those. I included photos of movie stars of the era and many representations of New York, a city that he loved and visited several times a week for work. The work I do now is a continuation of the door that opened for me then."

In high school, Cheney was encouraged to pursue writing over art. She did use that skill professionally for a while, first as an advertising agency copywriter and later for not-for-profit organizations. Visitors to Cheney's website will find she uses language to advantage, providing passages that describe and illuminate her artwork.

But though she states, "I was born with a pen in my hand," it is impossible to imagine the creator of "Receptacle Project" without a needle and pair of scissors, too.

The Blue Door Art Center, 12 Riverdale Ave., Yonkers, is open 3-6 p.m. Thursday-Friday and 1-6 p.m. Saturday. For further information visit bluedoorartcenter.org.