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MAD's Open Studios put artists on display

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Fiber artist Ruth Marshall at work (Photo by Colleen Kelsey)

By Colleen Kelsey

On the sixth floor of Columbus Circle's Museum of Arts and Design, the collection is not the only thing on display. While the floors below house a variety of craft and design objects, the Open Studios showcase a different type of exhibition: artists at work.

On a recent Thursday afternoon, artist Sophie Kahn carefully guided tiny, glimmering black beads down vertical lengths of transparent fishing line. The wires, suspended from two bases, echo the shape of a rectangular prism: the model has both length and depth. When positioned to her satisfaction, Kahn crimped the bead in place with pliers before grabbing another.

The little black balls look as though they are hovering in midair. If the model is turned ninety-degrees, the beads begin to compose the façade of a building. Though in the early stages, Kahn is creating a three-dimensional model of a church in the Croatian city of Dubrovnik a project she hopes to someday produce on a life-size scale.

On a neighboring table, more of Kahn's work is available for the viewer to examine, visually and digitally. Before coming to MAD's open studios, Kahn photographed a series of self-portraits, which were then scanned into a computer and cut into the centers of blocks of crystal by laser machines. Visitors can lift the crystals to see the figure inside: a ghostly image of Kahn herself.

The open studios at the Museum of Arts and Design have broken the traditional barrier between the artist and the museum visitor. The featured artists fuse creation with exhibition, inviting the museumgoer into their workspace. Visitors meet the museum's artists in residency and get an intimate look at the process

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behind the creation of a variety of art objects. The objective is to generate a conversation between the visitor and the artistic process.

MAD counts itself as one among few museums offering such a program. The open studios feature a roster of artists working in various media: ceramic, fiber, mixed media, glass, and metal. Each group of artists rotates after three months working at the museum. This season, MAD is showcasing the work of six artists.

Kahn, a new media artist and visiting professor in Digital Arts at Pratt Institute, was selected for the program after applying on the museum's website. She receives a stipend for materials and studio space from the museum, and the interactive nature of the open studios gives her work exposure and constant feedback, Kahn said.

Ruth Marshall, another MAD open studio artist, agrees. "Sometimes a comment or a question relates to a part of my overall concept. Here, I can see directly how my work is affecting the viewer," Marshall said.

Marshall's latest endeavor is the Tiger Pelt Project. The fiber artist takes measurements from actual tiger pelts on display at the Museum of Natural History and recreates them using textiles. The result is a life-size representation of a tiger pelt, but instead of skin and fur, it's weaved from yarn.

Marshall, who previously worked primarily with metal, discovered new materials and conceptual possibilities after working as an exhibit sculptor at the Bronx Zoo. The Tiger Pelt Project is an art project designed to raise awareness and money for tiger conservation organizations, according to Marshall's artist statement.

Though the artists themselves serve as live exhibitions, they also provide a resource for those involved in the arts. "I really like coming here to see what the artists are doing," said Jade Scarr, a 22-year-old student at Parsons the New School for Design. "Picking up new techniques or seeing how other people are working can really influence how I approach my own work in the future."

The open studios can serve as a launching pad to inspire others. Jewelry maker and ceramic artist Yasha Butler applied for the open studios after visiting them herself. Her current work, which combines inspirations from nature with fiber, metal, and porcelain materials, is based upon objects she found in Central Park.

Butler arranges each inspiration next to the in-progress jewelry piece it inspired. And her final product? "It's too soon to tell," Butler said.

"It will be a collection of some sort but of what I'm not exactly sure." Pointing to two knotted fiber pieces adorned with porcelain beads, she continued, "Those could turn out to be earrings, or brooches, we'll just have to see."



Yasha Butler's hands-on approach
(Photo by Colleen Kelsey)

The open studios at MAD run 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and 2:30 to 5:00 p.m. daily, with additional hours, 6 to 8:30 p.m., on Thursdays.

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