

Undeniable accessibility

Sculptor's dyslexia is the subject of his art

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By Lucinda Breeding / Arts & Entertainment Editor

Eric McGehearty's sculpture takes a big risk. It frustrates the viewer, and taps into the desperation contemporary consumers feel when they can't get information.



DRC/Barron Ludlum
Eric McGehearty

When the viewer feels disadvantaged by the rows of books stuffed into cement blocks, or tries to read titles in books bound forever shut with custom-made steel bindings, it's a taste of McGehearty's constant struggle to navigate his text-saturated world as a severe dyslexic.

Dyslexia is a developmental disability that affects a person's ability to read, write and spell. The disorder can affect short-term memory, ability to process mathematical information, sequencing and personal organization. The disorder is biological, and varies in severity.

Dyslexia is the launch pad for McGehearty's recent work, defined by a hallmark sculpture he calls *Access Denied*. The piece is a sort of stainless steel nova of books, flying every which way and always, always permanently sealed.

When he talks about his sculpture, McGehearty isn't thrown by the fact that his work doesn't get a "Gee, that's pretty" response.

"No. I want you to feel something and have a reaction. That's good," McGehearty said.

McGehearty graduated from the University of North Texas School of Art last year, and since then, the sculptor has been scoring regular exhibits. Most recently, he had a solo show at 416west gallery, a clever Denison space dedicated to contemporary

work by emerging and mid-career artists. The gallery is owned by Linda and Lawrence Matthews.

Linda Matthews said she knew she wanted to exhibit his work immediately.

“We get all sorts of proposals from all sorts of artists, and a lot of artists don’t really know how to promote their own work,” she said. “Larry actually got his packet and was looking at it while we were on the phone. He said, ‘Oh, you’re going to love this.’”

She did, and McGehearty brought about 21 pieces to the gallery. The bulk of the work was sculpture, but some studies and drawings were included.

McGehearty said his work was much more figurative when he was studying at UNT.

“When I came into grad school, I was doing bronze figures. They were these surrealistic pieces with figurative elements. People in various stages of struggle,” he said. “I used a lot of mythological names. My teacher, Mike Cunningham, asked me, ‘What is it with all these people in struggles?’ And I just said, ‘I don’t know.’ He really pressed me and I told him, ‘I’m dyslexic and I’m really frustrated.’ He told me he thought I should just deal with that.”

McGehearty said he decided to abandon the dreamy figures — bronze bodies that were suggested by just a head, legs and arms laboring to pull a bronze chain attached to a wall — and finally have his knock-down, drag-out battle with books.

That’s when the artist started getting attention.

It began with a newspaper announcement begging for books. People called and gave him boxes of them.

“I put a request in the paper for books and people just started calling me. I wonder if they would have given them to me if they knew what I was going to do with them?” McGehearty said.

He wasn’t kind to them. He stuffed books, hardback and paperback, into cement blocks he molded himself. In these pieces, he laid the blocks out in rows on the floor and mounted them on the wall.

He also thrust metal rods through them in pieces like Information Transformation, a large sculpture made to look as if branches, within a composite metal coating, are growing through books. In pieces like Access Denied and Repression, Compression,

Expression, McGehearty uses a mysterious process to bind each book in a sort of stainless steel band. As if to mock the puzzles created by his dyslexia, the pieces make you wonder how he got the books into these metal bands, causing you to recall the mystery of ships stopped up inside glass bottles. McGehearty prefers to let viewers wonder, and keeps his process a secret.

He also made several etchings that are nearly readable, a concept he repeats by making his own books in his Out of Focus series. You can almost make out the text on the transparent pages, but not quite.

McGehearty is able to laugh at his struggles, too. In Collision of a Fourth Grader, a elementary school desk has crashed into the wall, and hundreds of No. 2 pencils are scattered around it on the floor. The crash seems to have been caused by books, again dunked and stuck fast in cement, but painted in school bus yellow and black.

It hasn't been easy. He grew up in an academic family. He was diagnosed at age 5, and finally landed in the Shelton School in Dallas, the school where an art teacher inspired him about 15 years ago. He did well in school despite his dyslexia, and earned his bachelor's degree at the University of the Ozarks in Clarksville, Ark.

McGehearty's literacy is apparent in Outside the Box. He used books in cement, but doused them in blue paint. A lone volume is mounted on the wall, outside the box created by the blue blocks. The book is Moby Dick.

"I actually read a lot," the artist said. "I probably read a lot more than a lot of people who don't have a problem reading. But I get my books on this audiotape from the Library of Congress." Cassettes are recorded primarily for the blind, but people with severe dyslexia can use them as well.

"The only thing that's bad about it is that I can't get a lot of new stuff," he said.

There are rows of art books on his home bookshelf, but he has trouble reading more than a paragraph in a sitting. Instead of avoiding books, he uses a computer program that reads e-mail and computer files aloud.

Though his work of late deals specifically with his struggle with the printed word, it transcends that and touches on other forms of denial. It even harks back to the slow change in education as a privilege for the higher class to a compulsory institution for children in developed nations.

Linda Matthews said the show reached many viewers emotionally, and some viewers directly.

"There was a little girl here, and her mother said that she had dyslexia, too. Eric came up and he took her around the gallery and talked to her about all of the pieces," she said. "I hope that she left here knowing that she isn't alone. But more than that, I hope she knows that there might be a creative outlet for her."

McGehearty continues to catch attention. He's working on a public art installation at a Fort Worth fire station, a commission he earned to cast large bronze firefighter boots. The project was awarded to him by collector Raymond Nasher.

However, his struggle with information has produced his most universal sculpture.

"Access Denied" and its sister sculptures are about frustration and, ultimately, the rewards of tenacity and resourcefulness. Eric McGehearty can't read the books he's defaced for the sake of art, but he can get them, and his ideas, into a good downtown gallery, where literate people will find that the artist measures up, both as a creative soul and a student. McGehearty swam through the ultra-literate world of graduate school. He most certainly didn't sink.

"This isn't a pity party at all," he said. "If anything, it's a success story."

LUCINDA BREEDING can be reached at 940-566-6877. Her e-mail address is cbreeding@dentonrc.com.

416WEST GALLERY

Address: 416 W. Main St., Denison

Phone: 903-463-0416

Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays; 1 to 5 p.m. Sundays

Web site: www.416westgallery.com