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## 'Journal of the Plague Years' puts microscope on life under COVID

By Jason Kerr - June 27, 2023



Artists Betsy Rosenwald (left) and Dawna Rose (right) pose for a photo in front of their newest exhibit, 'Journal of the Plague Years', which opened at the Mann Art Gallery on Thursday, June 22. -- Jason Kerr/Daily Herald

The early months of the COVID-19 lockdowns were a difficult time for Saskatoon-based artists Betsy Rosenwald and Dawna Rose, but they channeled those emotions into the creative process, and the results are now on display at the Mann Art Gallery.

'Journal of the Plague Years: 2020-2023' officially opened at the Mann on Thursday, June 22. The exhibit covers an entire wall in the gallery, and features individual pieces about specific events combined to make one giant piece of art.

"This is what I've always wanted to see," Rose said in an interview following the reception. "I wanted to see it from the floor to the ceiling, and here it is, so they (Mann Art Gallery staff) did a terrific job. I'm really pleased about it"

"We saw it at Remi Modern and it was a very organized strip," Rosenwald added. "Here it's just floor to ceiling, and probably more how we had originally envisioned it, so it's quite exciting.

"It's kind of screaming at you in a different way because there's no space. Everywhere you look, somebody's yelling at you, so it's kind of fun and kind of overwhelming, but that's what we mean it to be."

The exhibit takes its title from Daniel Defoe's 1722 book, 'A Journal of the Plague Years', a researched account of The Great Plague of London in 1655.

Rose and Rosenwald wanted to document the various events and milestones that took place during the COVID lockdowns. Their individual paintings focus on COVID updates, political news, current events like the George Floyd protests, and items of interest from their personal lives, like a birding project they were involved in.

Rosenwald said it was an intense experience, especially as an American watching the lead up to the 2020 presidential election. She felt like she had no place to put those feelings except on cardboard.

"Making the work, it was just such an, almost, pleasurable escape from what was happening," Rosenwald remembered. "I really engaged my mind and I thought a lot about what I wanted to say. I didn't just want to parrot what was in the newspaper. It was very interpretive."

"We were locked in our studios," Rose added. "That was our only happy place. We basically dodged people in the sidewalks to go from our houses to the studio."

Collaborating on a project was new for both artists. Rose said they are both "very independent", and did not originally plan on working together. Once they finished their individual paintings, however, both artists decided it was best to mix their work together into one large exhibit.

'Journal of the Plague Years' also features a work station where patrons can create their own miniature piece of art and hang it on a nearby wall. Both artists said the goal is to help people process the last two years, not tell people how they should feel about it.

"Everybody has their pandemic," Rosenwald said. "Our experience is that when people view it, they start telling us their memories, so I think it's an opportunity to reflect and to re-position how you felt."

The Mann Art Gallery is one of the first galleries to host the exhibit. It was originally shown at the Remai Modern in Saskatoon, and both artists hope it will travel around Canada.

"I'm really, really pleased that it's out of Saskatoon, (and) extraordinarily pleased that the Mann took it on," Rose said. "Both Betsy and I really wanted to get it outside of Saskatoon. I think it's an important work. It's a community-based thing that happened here, but I know there are communities across Canada or the U.S. or the world that have things to contribute to it, so it would be really great if it could get out."

Journal of the Plague Years is on display at the Mann Art Gallery until Aug. 19. The exhibit was one of three new display the gallery unveiled on Thursday. Please see the Saturday, June 24 edition of the Daily Herald for an article one of those exhibits featuring the work of ceramics artist Charley Ferrero.

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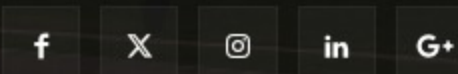
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