

N.Y. / REGION | ARTS | WESTCHESTER

At Exhibitions in Peekskill, Art in Plain English

By SUSAN HODARA MARCH 25, 2016

Visitors entering the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill will find themselves standing beneath a cluster of shiny silver umbrellas that seem to be tumbling in the wind. Looking up, they will notice that lines of text have been cut into each umbrella. On the wall below, as if raining from above, silver letters are arranged vertically to form words: “kindness,” “dream” and others.

This floor-to-ceiling, site-specific installation is “Let the Positive Come Out,” by Laura Kimpton, known for her monumental one-word sculptures at the annual Burning Man festival. At the Hudson Valley Center, she is part of the exhibition “Word.”

Each of the more than 70 works in “Word” incorporates text: isolated letters, bold words, enigmatic phrases, provocative sentences or fragments of stories. They are painted, printed or photographed; projected, beaded or sewn. They are etched into bronze, scribbled onto plywood, outlined with nails. Lines of text create diamond patterns in the wallpaper in Kristyna and Marek Milde’s living-room-like installation, “Home in a Home.” In Bill Schuck’s “Sometime,” the letters of the work’s title are seeded with grass that will grow through the run of the show.

“Word” features 55 artists, who range in age from their 20s to their 80s. Most were selected from the center’s first-ever regional open call. Their work is displayed alongside pieces by established international artists including Ms. Kimpton, Ann Hamilton, Oscar Murillo, Stefan Brüggemann, John Mellencamp (yes, the musician) and Robert Indiana, whose iconic “Love” towers eight feet tall.

Ms. Kimpton explained that the texts cut into her umbrellas are from some of the Old Testament’s bloodier passages, and that the more uplifting words on the wall consist of individual letters from those verses. “The umbrellas are dropping

letters to rain out the positive words from the negative ones,” she said during the show’s opening last month.

Like Ms. Kimpton, Lance Johnson of Mount Vernon sprinkles positive messages throughout his compositions. He uses spray paint, markers, collage and stencils to produce layered imagery inspired by graffiti, jazz and hip-hop. In the large-scale “Colored Girl,” a woman’s profile is overlaid with a frenetic array of colorful marks and words such as “evolve,” “soul” and “post no ills.” “I consider my work a celebration of urban life,” he said. “It’s like I’m in combat with the negativity that we’re bombarded with.”

The power of words pervades the exhibition. “Language adds another dimension to the artwork that draws the viewer in,” said Donna Mikkelsen, the center’s director of education and one of the four curators of “Word.”

Museumgoers may ponder the elusive meaning of the word “just,” present in each of Inguna Gremzde’s 12 tiny circular paintings of a lone figure with an empty shopping cart in an endless supermarket aisle. They may chuckle at Carla Rae Johnson’s portrait of a woman overwhelmed by her devices — phone, computer, iPod, Kindle, remote and a tangle of wires — beside the phrase “I am listening.” They may start humming the Culture Club song that was the source for Jeffrey Gibson’s beaded tapestry “In Time We Could Have Been So Much More,” the lyric set within a black-and-white checkerboard.

Visitors may move closer to Emma Rivers’s dollhouse-like dioramas in order to read the snippets of memories she has placed inside. Her five constructions are re-creations of the homes where she grew up, each filled with miniature furnishings and photographs from her past. (Ms. Rivers, who lives in Montrose, is a daughter of the artist Larry Rivers.) Some elements appear childlike, but Ms. Rivers’s written chronicles of her unsettling experiences are hardly whimsical. In “179 Meeting House Lane,” a typed sentence broken into four sections and arranged in the corner of a room reads: “Sleepwalking, Emma rose from the couch, found her way to the kitchen, & peed on the floor.”

Other sorts of unsettling experiences are documented in the center’s mezzanine gallery, painted in emphatic letters on the shirtless backs of anonymous subjects in a series of photographic portraits. The portraits are new additions to “The ‘I’m Tired’ Project,” a social-media-based campaign illuminating the harmful effects of common discriminatory remarks. The statements of every participant

begin with “I’m tired of ...,” with the results addressing race, gender, health, politics and culture.

The project was started on Facebook last June by Paula Akpan and Harriet Evans, two 2015 graduates of the University of Nottingham in England. Before the show’s opening, Ms. Akpan spent a 10-day residency at the center, overseeing “I’m Tired” photo shoots with dozens of community members, including local high school and middle school students and children from the Peekskill Youth Bureau. (The children printed their statements on their palms.)

The outcome is the project’s first exhibition: 27 large photographs and 18 small ones. The large images are accompanied by commentary from the subjects themselves. The declarations on their backs include “I’m tired of the pressure to be perfect”; “I’m tired of being dismissed because I’m old, grey and short”; and “I’m tired of unchecked privilege.”

To date, the “I’m Tired” Facebook page has over 32,000 followers from more than 45 countries, with nearly 65 photographs that have sparked spirited online discussions. Last month, Prime Minister David Cameron of Britain named Ms. Akpan and Ms. Evans the 481st and 482nd winners of the daily Points of Light award, a program honoring volunteers that was established by President George Bush in 1990 and initiated in Britain in 2014. At the “Word” opening, Nick Astbury, a British deputy consul general, presented the award to the pair (Ms. Evans, now employed full time and unable to travel, joined in on Skype).

“We get messages from people saying how much we’ve helped them,” Ms. Evans said the previous week (again on Skype). “They tell us they woke up that day feeling awful about themselves, and they looked at our page and something there made them feel better. It’s meant to be an empowering project, and it’s empowering for us, too.”

“The ‘I’m Tired’ Project” runs through May 1 and “Word” through July 31 at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, 1701 Main Street, Peekskill. For more information: hvcca.org or 914-788-0100.

A version of this article appears in print on March 27, 2016, on page WE9 of the New York edition with the headline: Art in Plain English.