

Ascending Divas: Artist E.V. Day delivers an opera-inspired exhibit

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Alice Gray Stites, director of artwithoutwalls, looks over the Cinderella dresses. Artist E.V. Day has installed her Divas Ascending, which features eight elegant opera costumes suspended in the Kentucky Center. (By Pam Spaulding, The Courier-Journal) / cj

With sunlight streaming into the lobby at the Kentucky Center, visibility was good. But it looked as though Lawrence Mitchell had gotten lost in an array of hats strung between two round hoops.

Artist E.V. Day looked on unconcerned, however. She knew that Mitchell, her assistant, was perfectly in control as he and a small crew hung her Ascending Divas, an exhibit which now dominates the space high in the center's atrium.

Because we just mentioned hats, and because this is mid-April, you might think this exhibit is Derby related. Not quite.

Ascending Divas is inspired by opera and some of the most memorable characters who inhabit that world. It's created by Day, whose reputation exploded after a piece from her series Exploding Couture became part of the 2000 Whitney Biennial.

That piece, "Bombshell," is a sculpture based on an iconic costume — the white halter dress that

Marilyn Monroe made famous in “The Seven Year Itch” — which splits into a multitude of pieces seemingly flying in all directions, an explosive motion frozen in time.



Over the course of about five days, the crew mounted eight sculptures in the atrium, each made by Day from outfits that once were part of the New York City Opera's costume shop. Like her work for Exploding Couture, the clothing of each character is suspended with the aid of miles of fishing line. Day carefully and decisively attached the wire to the garments to put the characters in a state of frozen motion.

Many are tragic, such as Canio's clown in “Pagliacci,” who stabbed his wife upon learning she was having an affair. He hangs as if falling from the sky, his white, flowing garment lit by sun pouring through the skylight, and surrounded by bloody knives. There's also Violetta from Verdi's “La Traviata,” who found a great love just before dying from tuberculosis and Mimi, still dressed in a lush red dress but posed in rigor mortis illustrating her death from the same illness in “La Bohème.”

But there are also characters from more cheerful operas, including Hanna, the lead character in “The Merry Widow,” who is falling, having gone literally head over heels.

Louisville bound

These pieces were part of an exhibition that the New York City Opera commissioned Day to create for the grand promenade space at Lincoln Center during the company's 2009-10 season. To create 13 pieces (eight of which are in the Louisville exhibit), Day combed through a trove of the company's costumes and boned up on the world of opera and its many iconic characters.

“It was like being a kid in a candy store,” she said of the sorting through the costumes and dreaming up how she could present them.

After the temporary exhibit closed, Day packed up her pieces to store in her studio. Not long after, Day said, James Salomon — whose gallery, Salomon Contemporary, represents the artist — came by her studio. He missed the Lincoln Center installation, but upon seeing the pieces, she said, realized “these have got to go out.”

In a matter of weeks, Salomon made a connection with Alice Gray Stites, director of artwithoutwalls, the Louisville nonprofit founded by Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson. It specializes in unconventional visual art projects worldwide, using a range of media. The three had been talking with Kentucky Center President Stephen Klein about an exhibit.

“He is such an opera buff,” Stites said of Klein. “It was clear during our conversations which exhibit ideas sparked his imagination.”

Living history

Given the documentation she found on some of the garments, Klein relishes the probability that Mimi's costume was worn by legendary diva Renata Scotta, whose debut in this country was Mimi in “La Bohème” in 1960 at Chicago's Lyric Opera. He imagines that the beloved American soprano Beverly Sills wore the costume of the Merry Widow.

“All of these things have a history,” Klein said.

The history of the pieces fascinated Day as well. She found labels inside many of the garments, often sewn one on top of another, with the names of opera companies and performers. Seeing them up close and learning how the costumes were built was another of Day's fascinations — from the lining and other parts of the costumes' interiors to the solid seams and connecting parts.

“They're just built to the hilt,” she said. “It's very different from couture clothing or any kind of garment.”

Day said one of her favorites is the piece she calls “Skirt Chaser” — inspired by the lecherous lead character in Mozart's “Don Giovanni.” Its pieces consist of an ornate petticoat paired with pink bloomers and two black gloves, their fingers oh-so-greedily reaching for what promises to be just beyond the fabric. The petticoat, Day notes, was made using 17 layers of crinoline and a wire hoop for support.

Then there are the two dresses that make up Cinderella. On one side is the satin gown with flowers and faux pearls. Then there is the shabby-looking peasant dress made, Day said, of “the finest merino wool to look like burlap” and a bodice of silk velvet.

Recasting feminine

Day's work in Ascending Divas is similar to her Exploding Couture series, but she sees these works as a step towards telling more of a narrative.

“Most of my work deals with a frozen moment in time,” she said. “But here, there's a whole story that goes with each piece.”

Day took some artistic license when she created the piece based on “Carmen,” Bizet's opera in which the heroine is stabbed to death by a spurned lover whom Day described as a “milquetoast.” In the sculpture, the artist gets the last word.

“It just seems so unfair,” she said of the ending. “So, with her costume I made a bloody dagger as though she's holding it in her hand and maybe she can get revenge someday.”

The touch echoes several themes in Day's work, which Stites describes as “fraught with complexity and violence.” She also addresses the power of the feminine — and how it is constrained.

In her 2005 work, G-Force, first shown at the Whitney Museum, she positioned thongs (yes, women's underwear) along suspended wires, creating an image reflecting a fighter jet formation.

Next month, Day will be in New York City, where she lives, for the opening of a show exhibiting her “Madame Butterfly” sculpture from the Ascending Divas series, along with a wall sculpture by one of her mentors, Alice Aycock.

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