

weekend plus best bets

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VISUAL ARTS>

'Making Mends' at
Bellevue Arts Museum

Artwork tells stories of loss and healing

EXHIBITION REVIEW

BY GAYLE CLEMANS
Special to The Seattle Times

If you've ever lost a loved one, sat with someone who is sick or felt deep empathy for the distress of unknown others across the world, you know the feeling of powerlessness that can arise from the inadequacy of words and the inability to alter events.

The internationally and nationally known artists in "Making Mends," a heartbreaking and soul-soothing exhibition at the Bellevue Arts Museum, have taken action, forging bold and tender works that offer respite and succor.

Art has functioned as a tool for healing in many cultures, from Navajo sand painting to Christian icons used in prayer. But in the contemporary-art world, with its aesthetic, conceptual and social-critical frameworks, it is a rare thing to find a large-scale, first-rate exhibition that focuses on the possibilities of healing through art. Organized by BAM curator Nora Atkinson, "Making Mends" is not an easy show. It exposes pain even as it suggests, powerfully and quietly, that art can be restorative.

Catherine Grisez's pieces are both gorgeous and grotesque. Exquisite jewelrylike chains, gems and beads spill forth from flesh-colored wound forms; they are on display as small, riveting, stand-alone sculptures and can be seen in the accompanying video, disfiguring a face, dripping suicidally from wrists and encrusting the bottom of a foot. The jarring force of these images is alleviated by the delicate loveliness of the materials. Grisez suggests that even beauty can emerge from pain.

Atkinson was smart to greet visitors to this intense show with a visually delightful work. Paul Villinski's installation of birds made from shiny black LPs draws us in as the birds—symbols of hope or links to the divine in many cultures—seem to flutter across the wall. The title, "Diaspora," adds weightiness to the whimsy, as we're asked to think about forced migration and the scattering of people.

Dietrich Wegner's "Playhouse" is one of those works of art that you can just get right away. A rope ladder extends

from the bulbous top of a big, bulky mushroom cloud; the symbolism is obvious and that's not a bad thing. But the work is also ambiguous: Does the ladder offer an escape from destruction or the hopeful, but literally unreachable, possibility that there is safety to be found within?

"Labyrinth" by Motoi Yamamoto is the other big installation in the show and it hits hard. Driven by a need to find meaning after his 24-year-old sister died from cancer, Yamamoto creates ritualistic site-specific installations.

On the floor of the gallery, Yamamoto forged white crystalline pathways out of salt, a material with funerary, purifying associations in Japan. At the far end of the installation, inaccessible mountains of salt seem to erode into the maze of rivulets. This ghostly topography conjures up ideas about searching and longing, destruction and creation, presence and loss.

The traces of repeated physical gestures are found throughout the exhibition, a potent extension of the Bellevue Arts

Museum's focus on handcrafted techniques and art forms. The show feels personal and universal, vulnerable and valiant.

In the presence of suffering, action is often needed but elusive. These artists generously remind us that creative acts can bridge the abyss of damage and loss.

'Making Mends'

11 a.m.-5 p.m.
Tuesdays-Sundays, 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Free First Fridays, through May 27, Bellevue Arts Museum, 510 Bellevue Way N.E., Bellevue; \$7-\$25 (425-519-0770 or www.bellevuearts.org).