‘Artist’s Duke Hall Show Touches On South, Central American Issues’

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Chilean mixed media artist Edgar Endress installs his work for an exhibit at James Madison University’s Duke Hall Gallery on Wednesday afternoon.

Growing up under a dictatorship has influenced much of Chilean-American artist Edgar Endress' work.

It wasn't until Endress was in college when the regime led by Augusto Pinochet dissolved, having overthrown the democratically-elected government in a coup d'etat 16 years prior. Centuries before, Chile was a colony of Spain until 1818.
Endress moved to the U.S. in 1999 to study at Syracuse University and is now a professor of new media and director of the graduate program at George Mason University's School of Art.

From Jan. 16 to Feb. 17, Endress will display several mixed media projects, including video and performance pieces, in the exhibit, "A Celestial Emporium" at Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art on the James Madison University campus.

Claudia Muniz (left), a 21 year-old JMU student and intern, helps MFA student Lynda Bostrom install a large mixed media piece by Chilean artist Edgar Endress at JMU’s Duke Hall Gallery on Wednesday afternoon.

The works in the exhibit touch on various social issues in South and Central America and the Caribbean. The name is derived from the 1942 fictional taxonomy written by Jorge Luis Borges.

"It's based on a writing about how we catalog and how we create inventory of things, and how we understand the universe based on the limitation of what we know," Endress said. "In
Endress further explained, "The idea [is] that the colonial system created a form of dominance through knowing, and creating a frame of reference — boxing — and I tried to find ways to break that."

In his piece "Act of Knowledge," images from illustrations in old dictionaries, encyclopedias, scientific books and manuals are reassessed to tell a completely different story. Cut outs of illustrations are layered over the original text. "Act of Knowledge" explores and challenges classification and the notion of "otherness," as racist underlinings can be found in colonial illustrations and depictions of indigenous peoples.

By creating an open platform, Endress questions the dominant narrative of these texts.
"[It's] a taxonomy of questioning the layers of knowledge and reintroducing storytelling — a much more personal narrative rather than the institutional narrative," he said.

His goal through the exhibition is "re-assessing the structure of knowledge that we have over things and re-assessing the impact of how people describe things to another."

A set of paintings based on colonial-era drawings Endress found from researching archives will be displayed in the exhibit.

"The idea for me was, again, the same principle, grabbing all the inventory of drawings of monkeys, birds and plants and remixing it to create some new taxonomy," he said. "So, over that period of time, they tried to create an archive of what they own. The colonial system was [taking] property by making drawings and archiving it."

Another project featured in the exhibit, "The Institution of Oblivion," was made in collaboration with Haiti's Office of Human Rights to bring awareness to Haiti's broken justice system. Prisoners incarcerated for even minor offenses can go years without seeing a judge, and sometimes a decade. These lost and forgotten inmates will write their story on scraps of paper to slip into the hands of lawyers or visitors in the prison, "screaming for recognition of their existence and their rights, a message-in-a-bottle seeking anything that might bring hope and salvation," the exhibit description says.

Real letters from Haitian prisoners will be on display at Duke Hall Gallery for audiences to read, translated from Haitian Creole. Endress hopes the project will bring more attention to the issue, so that someday a difference is made.

"You're hopeful that somehow, somewhere, by showing this work, eventually something happens," he said.

The adjacent space will house Endress' "The Shrine of the American Dream," which features paintings of 300 real U.S. patents tracing back as far as the late 19th century, placed on wooden
slabs he collected from demolished or abandoned houses, representing the U.S. housing crisis during the recession.

The American Dream was the belief that the U.S. was the land of opportunity where immigrants could build a new life through upward mobility. Patents were a way to achieve wealth. Endress searched archives for hours to find patents of various outfits, uniforms and masks. He then painted the illustrations he found and added color.

"The idea is, looking at the American Dream, [homeownership] is the manifestation of the American Dream, and then the patents are the idea of inventing something that will allow me to invent myself. I was trying to tie this idea of finding a way to create a portrait of what it means to transform yourself and how to reinvent yourself."
If "Celestial Emporium" has a unifying element, it's "subverting the idea of the preset in how we approach something," Endress said. He hopes the works create a platform for the audience to make their own interpretations.

John Ros, director of Duke Hall Gallery, said the exhibit is important for JMU students and the greater Harrisonburg community to see.

"It's so good for our student population to see this and be surrounded by work like this and be challenged in this way," Ros said. "It's bringing important conversations to the table and asking our students to confront issues and ask them what kind of citizen they want to be, who do they want to support, who do they want to help and what does it mean to be a citizen."

Ros described Endress' work as "approachable, pretty, interesting and illustrative."

"I think these things draw us in and then it's like an onion: you're peeling these layers and layers of context that's so deep in Edgar's brain, and we can only scratch the surface," he said. "It's complex work, and I think that's so good for our students."

The exhibit is part of a greater effort by Ros to offer more programming related to Harrisonburg's Latin community.

An artist reception will take place on Jan. 22 from 5 to 7 p.m. in the gallery, and an artist lecture will follow on Jan. 24 from noon to 1 p.m. in Duke Hall room 2036.

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