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Paper Boon

By Stephanie Murg

“Poetry surrounds us everywhere, but putting it on paper is, alas, not so easy as looking at it,” wrote Vincent van Gogh. The non-profit artist workspace Dieu Donn  does van Gogh one better, by putting the poetry in paper as well as on it.

“Per Square Foot,” the exhibition that inaugurated the paper-making studio’s new 7,000-square-foot workspace in New York City’s garment district and showcased the 178 works up for bid in its benefit auction tonight, revealed the myriad possibilities of paper— bleached, pigmented, molded, sewn, collaged, painted, salted, embossed, debossed, oil-stained, treated with urethane, inscribed with sumi ink, fashioned into a 72-inch chain, dusted with crushed pearls, infused with high-voltage electrostatically-charged carbon pigment or simply sketched upon with a pencil.

“While it is a benefit auction, it’s not just a bunch of donated C-prints,” says Peter Russo, Dieu Donn ’s program manager. “It’s all brand new work created on paper that we produced here in the studio, so the work is made especially for the event.”

Among Russo’s favorite works is Dieu Donn  Exploding Word Horse (above, right), a sculpture by Lesley Dill that transforms paper made at Dieu Donn  and archival glue into a small horse from which bursts a veritable alphabet soup. The ten-inch-tall construction is inscribed “How ruthless are the gentle,” which only sounds like a Jenny Holzerism; it’s actually a line from an Emily Dickinson poem.

For Russo, Dill’s piece helps to explode some of the misconceptions about works created on or with paper. “When people think of paper, they typically think of flat, two-dimensional drawings, and we do things that are sculptural and incredibly vibrant,” he says.

“Per Square Foot” echoes the literal dimensions of the works and the notion that adding square footage can positively impact the creative process,” notes Dona Warner, executive director of Dieu Donn . Most of the 61 works in tonight’s live auction are 12-by-12 inches, while the 117 silent auction works are smaller, most of them 5-by-7 inches.

The star-studded list of donating artists includes Polly Apfelbaum, Jim Hodges, William Kentridge and Kiki Smith, all of whom are among the approximately 500 artists that have collaborated with Dieu Donn  over the years.

Meanwhile, the organization is reaping the benefits of added square footage in other ways, having moved in late August into its stunning new 7,000-square-foot headquarters designed by architect Stephen Yablon. The expansion will allow Dieu Donn  to offer more studio time to artists and to expand its public programs, which include paper-making workshops for children and adults.

“In paper-making, as in most things, it is best to capitalize on the natural tendencies of the material, rather than fight against them,” says artist Kirsten Hassenfeld, a 2005-2006 Workspace Resident. “Paper is a very specific and particular material. It wants to do what it wants to do.”

On view through November 21 at the gallery at Dieu Donn  is “Basic Divisions,” a solo show of work by Polly Apfelbaum.