

FOCUS

The meditative ritual of art making

► Bryn Mawr resident Marjorie Fedyszyn embraces contradictions

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Marjorie Fedyszyn in her Casket Arts Building studio posing with "Sorrow (Sad Bags)." Photo by Susan Schaefer

Light and rain equally permeate the studio arts spaces of St. Catherine University's [Women's Art Institute \(WAI\)](#) Summer Studio Intensive. Every year, a dozen accomplished and aspiring artists work in the spaces, enclosed by soaring concrete walls supporting expansive skylights. Earning every letter of its "intensive" label, this legendary program pushes participants to exceed their limitations, occasionally causing mini meltdowns along the way.

During the program's 2016 session, Bryn Mawr resident Marjorie Fedyszyn could be found flying from studio to studio, a supportive art angel, generously providing an attuned ear and guidance for anyone in need.

This is Fedyszyn's hallmark.

"Marjorie is one of those rare individuals who uplifts all who cross paths with her in a classroom, in her studio, at her exhibitions, and out and about in the community," says her colleague Karl Reichert, executive director of Minneapolis' [Textile Center](#).

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Fedyszyn's energy fuels such outreach activities as the center's annual craft show and the after-school classes offered through the [Youth Fiber Art Guild](#).

"She is one of the most charismatic champions of fiber art in the Twin Cities," Reichert adds.

Fedyszyn emits a palpable, full-spectrum aura. A large part of her accessibility and authenticity stems from how she balances the lighter and darker hues of her life. Her diverse, multi-layered, mixed-media body of work expresses this duality, these seeming contradictions.

During the WAI program, her own creative process shifted. She had started journaling about events from her past, examining closely their meaning and impact. "The Women's Art Institute helped me to prioritize my art practice and recognize the dualities which show up in my work: protective layers or gaping vents; restraint and release; what is inside and what is outside; things lost and things found," she explains. "These contradictions are an expression of the protection from my past and of the openness and vulnerability I try to convey now, being honest and open with myself as well as the viewer."

This peeling back of layers undeniably propelled Fedyszyn to new choices of media, and to new heights of art making and expression.



"Object of My Desire," from the Irreproachable Exhibit, 2018, Hopkins Center for the Arts. Submitted photo

Chaotic roots/creative output

Fedyszyn grew up in Dunkirk, a western New York steel town hit hard by the recession of the 1970s.

"Creative expression was neither nurtured nor valued there," she recounts. She knew from an early age she didn't fit in.



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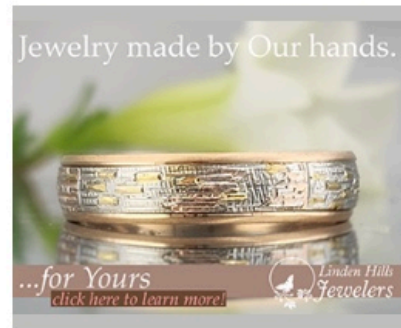
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As a child, she found peace and solace along the shores of Lake Erie, spending hours constructing worlds and structures from the detritus washed upon the shore — shells, bits of brick, driftwood, rope and sea glass.

“I built great temporary structures knowing they were impermanent, creating worlds and safe places where I would climb inside to hear the roar of the waves bringing new bits of treasure to me,” she says.

More than the downtrodden town confronted the young girl. Creative escape is often the realm of children who experience emotional alienation. Such was Fedyszyn’s lot. Her first-generation parents had suffered greatly as children of the Depression. Fedyszyn’s lake excursions were also retreats from the volatility that marked her homelife.

“Both of my parents suffered from lifelong depression,” she confides. “Because of the times in which they lived, and the stigma surrounding mental illness and therapy, their depression went untreated. There was a lot of anger. My relationship with both parents was strained and complicated for most of my adult life.”



Fedyszyn, seated far right at the Jerome Fellowship Exhibition panel discussion, under her expansive hanging "Home#46: Order/Chaos" sculpture, made of overbeaten abaca paper, slate, pex tubing and Nymo thread. Photo by Susan Schaefer

Thirty years ago, Fedyszyn, along with her husband, John, settled into a 1920s Bryn Mawr bungalow, choosing the peace and greenery of Minneapolis over the hubbub of Manhattan, where they had met and worked. Raising two (now adult) children, they cherish the city's lakes, its bike paths and the beauty of Theodore Wirth Park and the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden.

For a time after her father died in 2000 from complications of Alzheimer's disease, her mother, Anna, remained in New York in an assisted living facility. But as her mother declined cognitively and physically, the family moved her to a facility close to Fedyszyn in Minneapolis.

It proved to be a propitious move — profound and revelatory. Finally, her mother was treated for her depression and anxiety, resulting in long-overdue conversations and connections between the two.

“For the first time, I saw who my mother could have been and the life we could have shared,” Fedyszyn says. They were ultimately able to discuss painful issues and to heal some wounds. “I could see her for the frightened and injured person she was,” Fedyszyn confides, “which made it easy to simply love her.”

Anna died in January 2019 at the age of 94. Fedyszyn misses her deeply.

“The energy I devoted to her came at a price and my work flagged,” she explains. “I had lost my direction and drive.” Fedyszyn had focused her energy trying to create a happy and comfortable life for her mother's final years. “But in the studio, I was just going through the motions,” she says. In retrospect, Fedyszyn realizes how important this time was for her as a human being and as an artist. “Sharing such special time with my mother has added to the historic narrative of my family.”

And these accounts emerge powerfully in her new work. Discussing the emotional impact of living with family who suffer untreated depression — a once-taboo topic — is now more than ever out in the open. And Fedyszyn has mined, molded and shaped the mental illness that impacted her life and her work, sharing it through the alchemy of her art.





Marjorie Fedyszyn moved to Bryn Mawr 30 years ago, choosing the peace and greenery of Minneapolis over the hubbub of Manhattan. Photo by Susan Schaefer

Powerfully portraying pain

In Fedyszyn's 2017-18 sculpture "Sorrow (Sad Bags)," the shapes, textures and materials, with their weighted droop and unambiguous image of hanging, viscerally evoke the work's title.

A different type of distress permeated Fedyszyn's 2017 Art-A-Whirl exhibit, in which the bondage of tightly stretched and bound pieces recounted yet another painful episode in Fedyszyn's life — a molestation by a teacher when she was a child.

One particular sculpture in that exhibit, "Object of My Desire," depicts what appears to be a contorted torso folded in upon itself in a gesture of protection. Rooted in the sexual abuse she suffered as a teen, "the theme centers on what humans have influence over and what is out of our control." The molestations affected every aspect of Fedyszyn's life. Through counseling, she now considers herself a survivor. "This body of work has helped me find my true voice as an artist and further heal," she states.

Fedyszyn harnesses and shapes the various traumas she's suffered into her powerful sculptural narratives.

"Every one of us has a story to tell," she concludes. "I process my emotional history through the art I create, hoping to connect with others on some level. Art making is a meditative ritual, allowing me to explore the inner and external tensions around power and one's desire for control. These themes are informed by my past while keeping me present in my work."

The peace of reconciliation

Recently, her newfound awareness has morphed into a more intuitive approach to creating art.

“The caliber of Fedyszyn’s artistic work has progressed significantly in recent years,” Reichert says.

And the art world is noticing. In 2018 Fedyszyn won a highly coveted Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grant, which allowed her to complete the body of work for the Hopkins exhibit. The grant also led her to YouthLink, a nonprofit in Minneapolis serving young people ages 16-24. Twice a month, at drop-in sessions, she taught homeless youth fiber arts techniques as a means of centering — wisely devising projects that could be accomplished within an hour.

Working with this at-risk population, she witnessed the healing force of creating something with one’s own hands. “The stresses of homelessness are great,” she notes, “yet for a few minutes these individuals were able to be in that moment, and I was fortunate enough to be there with them.” Listening to stories of their childhood and hearing about the things they would make with their grandmothers or other family members and the dreams they had about what they could do with their own children was a rewarding experience for Fedyszyn — yet another step in the path of reconciling her own past.

This is entirely apparent in her brand new body of work, featured earlier this year in the prestigious Jerome Fellowship Exhibit at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

This latest body of work reflects the healing she has done over these last years. Experimenting in a new medium, overbeaten abaca paper, her shapes are now open, stretched, freed from bondage, white and gleaming, harkening back to the shells and bits she collected along Lake Erie’s shores as a child, reverberating with a newfound peacefulness and hope.

Susan Schaefer is an independent writer and communications consultant who founded the Creative Class public affairs committee as chair of the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce’s Leadership Program. She can be reached at insights@lifeintrans.com.