


ISLIP ART MUSEUM COLLECTION PICKED UP BY NATIONAL, GLOBAL MUSEUMS

February 12, 2020  Julianne Mosher

An exhibit that was shown in the fall of 2019 at the Islip Art Museum (IAM) has been picked up by several big-name museums around the world, including the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C.

"A Book About Death: The Last Waltz" curated by Islip native LuAnn Palazzo opened at the IAM in East Islip on Sept. 14. Quickly after, Palazzo told [GreaterBayShore](#), she started to get phone calls from across the Atlantic.

It's about [mail art](#), an art movement that began in the 1960s where artists created post-card sized drawings, paintings, images and designs revolving around a specific topic and mail copies to their friends and the rest of the art community.

"As it went on, it kind of just got bigger and bigger," she said. "And as word got out I kept getting contacted by all these museums from all over the world — it's got its own life."

Currently, the collection is archived at five famous museums including The Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., the Alternative Traditions in Contemporary Arts Archive of the University of Iowa, The Book Art Museum in Lodz, Poland, The Waskomium in Burlington, Vt. and at its original home, the Islip Art Museum at 50 Irish Lane.

"It's a really satisfying feeling," Palazzo said. "To get this recognition on a larger scale, not just for me, but for the whole movement... all my artists are going to be collected and archived in all of these fantastic places and that's a huge legacy."

But those five locations aren't the only ones scheduled to receive copies of the book and its exhibit. Six other museums around the globe, from the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan to the Museum Schloss Moyland in Bedburg-Hau Germany, have inquired about the project.

A Book About Death

Palazzo's exhibit was inspired by Ray Johnson, who is considered "New York's most famous unknown artist," by art historians.

He's also one of the founders of mail art.

Between 1963 and 1965, he began sending his artwork through the post.

"He felt that art was not meant to hang in museums but to be shared with friends," Palazzo said. "So he would do a page of something, make copies and send them to his friends — he actually created communication art before there was the internet."

Most of his artwork at the time was about death, a fascination Johnson had.

He later turned his creations into the "Book About Death," a 13-page collection of his work that he sent to his friends, including famous artist Andy Warhol.

The images aren't morbid or dark. Some are quirky, some are funny and some correlates with a piece Johnson performed and some are collages of different images, all rolled up into one, described Palazzo.

Johnson eventually moved to Locust Valley and then launched himself off the Sag Harbor Bridge in 1995 — an apparent suicide.

A New Book About Death

In 2009, artist Matthew Rose wanted to pay homage to Johnson by creating a new book about death. Rose asked for 500 postcards from each artist surrounding the theme of death.

487 artists participated and the show was a hit.

Viewers were able to walk around and enjoy the different representations of death that artists from all over created. The 500 copies were left out for viewers to take home, if they wanted, and some people used their collected art to bring their own shows back home. "This went on for years," Palazzo said. "Every year it was in different locations all over the world."

The 2009 Book About Death Project is currently archived at three different museums, including the MoMa.

The Last Waltz

To celebrate the 10th anniversary of the original exhibit, Palazzo and Rose decided to hold what might be the last "Book About Death" project — "The Last Waltz."

Palazzo said she wanted to pay homage to the whole history of the book — starting from Johnson's original inception, with a whole timeline showcasing the history. Inside the Islip museum's three galleries, she created a map for people to come and learn about the famous book.

She added that on opening night, people were amazed at how unique the exhibit was. "Death resonates with artists all over the world because it affects everyone," Palazzo said. "But no one talks about it... everybody has had somebody they love die... its life."

The postcards for the exhibit are unique. She asked the 200 worldwide participating artists to send in 500 cards (just as the show in 2009 did) and each artist did something different than the rest.

"For a lot of people when the first call was done, it actually helped people reach out to others going through the same thing," she said. "Expressing their feelings through their art and making these wonderful connections with likeminded artists, that's kind of why it keeps going, because there's still so much more to say about it."

Some images are photographs, some are sketches, and some are miniature paintings. Some have humor and some discuss social injustices on a small 4x6 cardstock. None are eerie or gory. They aren't spooky.

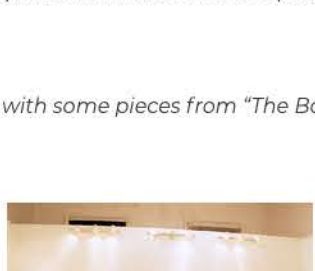
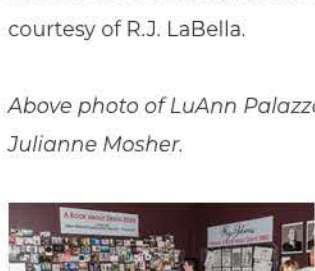
"In this country particularly, not only do we not talk about death, but we refuse to even look at it," she said. "And that's just not natural."

The exhibit took Palazzo over a year to curate because of all the history and communicating she had to do with artists around the world. Now knowing that even more people will be able to see the pieces in different galleries, she's thrilled.

"I feel very happy and accomplished... it's a wonderful thing," she said. "I never would have expected it in a million years. I do this out of love for my artists and for Ray and for the subject matter."

Scroll below to check out some photos from the exhibits opening night in September, courtesy of R.J. LaBella.

Above photo of LuAnn Palazzo with some pieces from "The Book About Death," photo by Julianne Mosher.



Julianne Mosher

Julianne Mosher is a freelance journalist covering everything from Manhattan to Montauk. When she's not exploring the north and south shores, she's usually found at any local coffee shop.