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Art meets memorial

Unique work made of mud from Montecito mudslides

By JOSEF WOODARD, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

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On a crisp, clear day from the hyper-scenic Winslow Maxwell Overlook of Santa Barbara City College, an unusual art and memorial event took place on Friday, with a conceptual artwork unveiling doubling as a memorial for the Montecito mudslide.

Artist Lily Pons, a student in the SBCC Art Department, conceived of and created a special artwork, literally using Montecito mud as putty to create a small flower pieces, fired and hardened in SBCC art department's kilns.

The end result is "Solid to Liquid, Liquid to Solid," in which a circle of mud-based flowers were arranged in a circle on a small patch of lawn — with a small void area outlining the shape of an infant child, a symbol of renewal.

After statements by the artist and City College faculty, people in the crowd were handed mud-flowers, and, after a moment of silence, invited to add their flowers to the circle.

Aptly, from this scenic vantage point, the gathered crowd could see the panoramic sweep and beauty of the Santa Barbara harbor, city and mountains, but also the stark contrast between the spring-green, unburned areas of the hills and the brown, post-Thomas Fire hillside regions to the south.

The college's Atkinson Gallery director Sarah Cunningham said "This is a perfect example of the work that art can do in our community."

She noted that Ms. Pon created 2,000 more mud-based flowers after learning of this special event, which was co-hosted by the Atkinson Gallery and the SBCC Wellness Connection, and which hosted representatives from the therapeutic Santa Barbara Reponse Network and 805 Hope organizations.

SBCC President Anthony Beebe was on hand for the ceremony, pointing out that, from the Outlook's wide-open point of view, "It's also quite appropriate that you can see the fire line very distinctly, where you get the green on the mountains and then the burnt area that extends down to the Rincon. That's very obvious to us, standing here.

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Santa Barbara City College student Lily Pon shows her art installation that honors the victims of the Montecito mudslides MICHAEL MORIATIS/NEWS-PRESS

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"One of the things that's interesting to me about the soil — and we all learned this when it came to the floods — is that the soil has actually changed by fire. It becomes crystallized and there becomes a slick coating on the outside of the soil elements, so that mudslides can happen easier.

"But just as the dirt has been changed, the fire and the mudslides that we experienced changed all of us. It's not in our DNA. It's all part of us, that whole community devastation and all that took place with that. What's so cool about this piece of art, this memorial, is that the mud that you used in this, Lily, is changed, just like the DNA in each of us."

He added that Ms. Pon's artwork "has great meaning to the community and to all of us here at Santa Barbara City College, which witnessed and talked to so many victims of the mudslides when we had the American Red Cross evacuation shelter set up here. This has great meaning to us. It's such an important statement to make and it's one that I know all of us appreciate so much."

In her statement to the small gathering at the Outlook, the artist stressed that, "As it was recently proven, life can change in just a moment. A solid, unmoveable mountain literally turned into liquid.

"We are here to remember all who were impacted by the powerful mudslide. As I witnessed this terrible tragedy, I was amazed by the response of the community. They came together to support each other, offering help in the form of clothes, food, money, a place to stay and even manual labor. I personally saw 30 people from the area and from as far away as Berkeley, using picks and shovels to remove mud from around houses.

"While this coming-together will not undo all of our losses, it grounds us, turning an uncertain situation back into something more solid and familiar."

In explaining her work, Ms. Pon offered that "the flowers are physically reminders of the fragility of our lives, and the stabilizing force we have on each other. They are formed from mud from the slide. They have been turned solid again in the kilns in the school."


As the interactive component of the memorial event unfolded, and visitors reverently and carefully placed their mud blossoms to a slowly expanding circle on the lawn, a moment of silence was respected on this scenic overlook.

"Now," suggested Ms. Cunningham, "also think about you can be part of our community of rebuilding."


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