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Weston artist Susan Beallor-Snyder weaves a rich narrative with lots and lots of rope

By Joel Lang | April 26, 2020

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Susan Beallor-Snyder, above, working in her Weston studio, and below with her finished piece at the United States Botanic Garden in Washington, D.C.
Photo: Contributed photos

Here's how to see the latest, largest, made-in-Weston rope sculpture by the artist Susan Beallor-Snyder:

On the United States Botanic Garden website, find the link to the 2020 Orchid Show and take the video tour. In the first segment, an overview of the display inside the Conservatory, watch for coiled tendrils of rope hinting at the sculpture to come. It will take a star turn in the longer second segment, a caressing scanning shot that shows the 8-foot-tall, 10-foot wide sculpture suspended before a glass wall.

Openings allow the sculpture to act as an airy frame to the Garden grounds. Yet at the same time, the sculpture's body is heavy with forms coiled, twisted and latticed. Some coils are tightly wound solids, like a braided rug. Others are looser, like a lasso. Thin ropes wind their way up thick ropes, like vines. Lengths of rope strung transversely make a hammock.

A narrator says the sculpture is a site-specific installation called "Weaving Narrative," that it is an expression of the artist's emotions and that it is made from 10,000 feet of manila rope, weighing 300 pounds. It also took a lot of hard work. The heaviest rope Beallor-Snyder used was two-inches thick.

"You're constantly drawing it through your hands, because you have to use long pieces. When you start weaving you have to pull it and pull it," she says.

Beallor-Snyder says that as far as she knows, she was offered the orchid show commission after the Garden's landscape architect, Nick Nelson, discovered her in an online search for rope artists. "Nobody's doing exactly what I'm doing," she says, adding she has "a good Google presence." Her recent sculptures may behave like murals or tapestries, but they are freer in form and gain depth from the rope.

On her website, Nelson likely saw the even larger rope sculpture, "Changing Tides," Beallor-Snyder made in 2017 for a luxury apartment building in Washington, D.C.'s revitalized Southwest Waterfront area. At 14-feet wide and more densely woven than "Weaving Narrative," it ate up 20,000 feet of rope.

One video on her website documents the removal of the completed "Changing Tides" from the loft of her Weston studio. A six-man crew cautiously eases it in a tarp, as if it were a sedated beast, down a ramp to a waiting truck.

Beallor-Snyder and her husband moved to Weston from New York City four years ago, partly in search of better studio space. They had lived in Westport from 2001 to 2006. But they were in Atlanta, where her husband was a Time-Warner executive, when she began experimenting with rope in 2011. Before that she had concentrated on photography and the design of fine jewelry, especially gold. She was searching for something new, but the radical switch in material and scale surprised even her.

"I don't know where it came from. It just came into my life," she says. "When I first discovered manila the rope the thing that drew me to it was the color and the texture and the heft of it. The way you could weave it and knot it was really wonderful. I was looking for something that would express emotion in a visual way. Rope is like a line; you're weaving a line. When I start I don't even know what it's going to look like. It's meditative. It's a journey," she says.

Some of her early sculptures were tall, thickly woven inverted triangles. But the first really large one she made was an actual physical journey, back and forth from living room to sun porch in her home.

"I started making this piece and I decided to go as far as I could into those rooms, so the piece ended up being 17 feet wide. My husband would come in and he was looking very worried because it was taking over the living room. It was draping over the chairs and the couch. He asked who I was making it for and I said, 'My feeling is, if you build it they will come.'"

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She says the sculpture titled, "Crossroads," became her calling card and is now being considered for display as public art, though it was premature to say where. As much as rope attracted her, in the beginning she found working with it painful. "It was heavy. My back hurt. It got into my fingers," she says. Now she keeps tweezers nearby and buys rope 400 yards at a time. Another hazard with rope sculptures is that they aren't easy to fix once begun.

"I don't do sketches or drawings. I have (the emerging design) in my head," she says. "With 'Weaving Narrative,' I started working it for several weeks and I pulled the entire thing out. Other artists can erase. I have to work the piece and then go, 'No, I don't like it.' It's a lot of time undoing. I have to untie the whole thing. That happens a lot."

She says she turned down several other jobs to take the orchid show commission after it was offered to her last April. She knew that this year the national Botanic Garden, promoted in turn by presidents Washington, Jefferson and Madison, would be observing its bicentennial. The orchid show was to end in May, but Beallor-Snyder expects the sculpture will stay until at least October.

She herself was impressed when she finally saw it in place. Other sculptures were hung flat against painted walls. But "Weaving Narrative" was backed by a glass wall and slightly removed from it.

"When they were hanging it, it suddenly came to me," she says. "It was like a whole new way of working, because you could see it from both sides, which I'd never done before. I was like, wow."

She expects it will inaugurate a new series of sculptures she is calling Woven Walls.

Joel Lang is a freelance writer.

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