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By MiChelle Jones • FOR THE TENNESSEAN • February 1, 2009
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Lauren Kussro two years ago filled Twist Art Gallery with sculptural floral forms made of handmade paper that were suspended from the ceiling. She called the show Handful of Tranquility.

For her latest Twist show, The Luminous Bower, Kussro is creating lanterns made of relief-printed handmade paper that she'll also suspend at different heights for a similar effect with, well, a twist.

"I wanted to keep the same energy that I had with that show because it was such a positive response from a really wide range of people," she said via phone from Knoxville, where she teaches drawing classes at a community college. "Kids loved it, and even though it was really feminine, a lot of guys liked it. It was really nice to have people respond to it in such a good way."

Kussro trained as a printmaker and incorporates those techniques into her sculpture. It's a labor-intensive process that begins with making her own paper. Next comes the cutting of the linoleum or wood blocks, followed by repeatedly printing swirls, curves and motifs reminiscent of the nature-derived patterns of the art nouveau movement.

Finally, the pieces are ready for construction. Each lantern measures about a square foot, and the entire process to create them takes about a week.

"It is labor-intensive, but it kind of is morbidly satisfying," Kussro said with a laugh.

She says she found it hard to use store-bought paper after working with handmade paper in grad school because it lacked the history of that she'd made by recycling her old prints. For the pieces she's creating for this latest Twist show, she's also mixing in bits of clothing.

"The recycling aspect of it, and just the fact that I've made the surfaces that I'm printing on, just kind of makes it that much more satisfying for me as a process."

Kussro says she bases her forms on organic shapes; her color palette reflects these origins.

"My last show (at Twist) was pretty muted, so I wanted to have the colors be a little bit brighter, but it's really hard because I have these unconscious color choices that happen when I'm mixing things and printing," she said. "It tends to be a little bit natural, a little bit more subdued, but

there are definitely going to be some pinks and oranges and bright purples and blues and greens."

Making the leap from printmaking to suspended sculptural forms started with two of Kussro's grad school classes. In the first, she began thinking about how people, "non-art" people in particular, interacted with art. The second required the creation of a public sculpture project.

"I started thinking about the sculptural form and just how it's different than a flat piece. You have many more opportunities to make it interesting because it's tactile as well as being visual," she said.

True to her roots, however, Kussro will complement the lanterns with a few flat pieces, though they won't be mounted like traditional pieces. Instead, she says they'll be "mounted on wood and shaped."

"I feel like it's very spiritual and personal and I don't want to dictate to people with my work," she says. "I want people to be able to feel contemplative when they see it and to just be affected by beauty, because that's really what I want to achieve with my work, a sense of beauty."