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Laura van Duren Creates Art to Share

By Andrea A. Firth



Laura van Duren's Truth Scope Photo Michael van Duren

The centerpiece of artist Laura van Duren's Not for Sale exhibit at the Mercury 20 Gallery in Oakland is an interactive installation called the Truth Scope. "I love the idea of creating art that people can interact with, that they can touch," says van Duren. The five-tier, funnel-like structure, which hangs from the gallery ceiling, is made of welded steel and covered with pages carefully selected from antique books about personal and political conflict. van Duren was inspired to create the interactive sculpture after hearing a presentation at Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church (MVPC) by the founder of Not for Sale, a campaign devoted to ending human trafficking and slavery.

"The cause resonates with me in a personal way," says van Duren, who grew up with domestic violence and her own experience of fear, threats, and forms of entrapment. She invites exhibit-goers to step inside the scope and help her to complete the sculpture. Chalk is provided for the viewer to share what he or she would like to be freed from by writing on the inside of the scope. Illuminated from the skylight above, birds that van Duren created in molds with resin, are suspended overhead as if in flight. The relatively small space inside the scope is evocative of the wide-open spaces in nature.

"This is the biggest thing I have ever made," says van Duren, who sculpted in clay for 20 years before venturing into welding. The Truth Scope took 12 hours to install and required a 17-foot long truck to transport it from her home-based studio in Lafayette. van Duren also created a series of collage boxes for the exhibit that are displayed on the gallery walls. The recurrent use of cages, ladders, birds, and branches in the collages and scope provide the imagery for the themes of freedom, safety, and escape, says the artist.

"I'm constantly seeking what I can use from the environment for my art," says the self-described scavenger of the suburban landfill, who regularly collects branches and other natural materials from her yard to supplement her art supplies. "And I'm a big believer in the concept of reuse," adds van Duren, who often shops for clothes at Lafayette's Wayside Inn Thrift Shop.

van Duren has lived with husband Michael and their three children (ages 22, 20 and 16) in Lafayette for 12 years and likes to share her art with the community, especially with young people. She recently traveled to Peru with a group from MVPC to help with the construction of a childcare center. She planned to teach art to the Peruvian children and work with the other young people on the trip to paint a mural on the inside walls of the center. van Duren shipped boxes of art supplies to the location in advance. When the supplies never arrived, she scoured the remote village for paint. Only able to find white house paint, the resourceful artist mixed the colors herself and was able to complete the mural. "I'm definitely going back," says van Duren, who enjoys social justice work and sees service as part of her role as an artist.

20% of the sales from van Duren's exhibit will be donated to Not for Sale. The exhibit will run at the Mercury 20 Gallery through September 25th, for more information go to www.mercurytwenty.com.

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