

EXHIBIT

The art of diplomacy

Through Artisphere, artists from sister cities Arlington, Aachen create collaborative works

BY DANIELLE O'STEEN

Art used for the sake of diplomacy is nothing new. There's a long list of countries that use art to promote their histories, their independence, and their cultural strength — everything from the national pavilions at the Venice Biennale to China's recent traveling exhibition of its Terracotta Army. Embassies are filled with art to stand in as visual ambassadors. International residencies bring artists to offer fresh perspectives to local art scenes. And, in the best-case scenario, there's an exchange.

Artisphere is looking to take a small part in that legacy.

Its current exhibition, "Project 2011: Face to Face," is marking the relationship between sister cities Arlington and Aachen, Germany, and turning this diplomatic relationship into collaborative art. It started in April, when a group of

Arlington artists was sent to Aachen to work with the German artists on a site-specific exhibition at the Aula Carolina, an arts center in a converted 17th-century monastery. Then this month, five Aachen artists arrived in Arlington for part two, reconnecting with their Virginia partners for 10 days to transform a gallery at Artisphere into their temporary workshop.

The resulting show features artists Mary Detweiler, Linda Maldonado and Nan Morrison from Arlington, and Monika Brenner, Gabriele Maria Corsten, Sylvia Nirmaier, Monica Radhoff-Troll and Mirjana Stein-Arsic from Aachen and is true to the spontaneity of such a cultural exchange.

Arranged by the artists across several galleries at Artisphere, the exhibition is hung as if the pieces are fresh from their workshop, pinned, clipped and tacked around the space. But if you're looking for finished works here, and a tidy exhibition design, you might be disappointed. The exhibition is rough, impulsive and even a bit inconsistent. But it's all part of this larger, ongoing conversation between these artists.

For the residency, they turned the main space, appropriately called the Works-in-Progress Gal-

lery, into their studio. They hung their canvases while they painted, set up tables to make prints and collages side by side, and even used a wall-sized chalkboard — a permanent feature in the space — to keep track of daily happenings. They lived together (as Aachen artists stayed in the Arlington artists' homes), shared meals together and brought their practices together.

They also found materials together, as seen in Radhoff-Troll's massive tapestry displayed in the center of the main gallery. The work is made of 1,300 tied and knotted Washington Post plastic delivery bags sourced by the local artists. Radhoff-Troll wove the bags into a metal frame creating a complex pattern of color, as she calls attention to the daily waste that is otherwise forgotten. Her other, smaller anemone-like works similarly use cut pieces from museum gift bags — from the Hirshhorn Museum, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and the National Gallery of Art — to similarly transform what is, in fact, trash, into art.

Nirmaier created work based on her journey to Washington, rather than the stay itself. Her totemic paintings cull from her stopover in New York, as she layers a frenetic arrangement of maps, tourist tickets and urban detritus on top of painted imagery of skyscrapers and intersections, evoking her own experience with an American metropolis.

But Arlington is left behind among most works, which often appear out of context, with few connections to Artisphere as a site and the Washington area generally. Instead they show artists sharing ideas. Maldonado, for instance, uses aluminum foil to add a textured surface to her marbled abstractions, a technique she borrowed from Stein-Arsic's own urban landscapes detailed with foil. Stein-Arsic, in turn, exhibits relief prints made into patterned abstractions with objects found in the home of her host, Detweiler.

Such connections are lost in the four other peripheral galleries that make up the rest of the exhibition, as the spaces are really just empty walls between meeting and



COURTESY OF ARTISPHERE

WASTE NOT: German artist Monika Radhoff-Troll used 1,300 tied and knotted Washington Post plastic delivery bags sourced by the local artists to create "WaPo Carpet."



LISA MCCARTY

ARTIST EXCHANGE: Artisphere participants Sylvia Nirmaier of Aachen, left, discusses her work with Linda Maldonado of Arlington, Uta Gobel-Gross of Aachen and a visitor.

performance areas, and include hidden, poorly-lit hallways.

Brenner's work, for instance, is split between two galleries, including a dull administrative corridor. But her spare abstractions on square, loose canvases reveal a thoughtful experimentation with gestures (heavy strokes of paint mixes with sand) and unlikely materials (red thread stitches up a slash in one canvas). Also lost are Morrison's rich abstractions,

which she painted while at Artisphere, chronicling her experience of the Tuscan countryside with strips of colors along an umbrella field, displayed on a back hallway, underneath hideous fluorescent lighting.

What the exhibition as a whole accomplishes is documenting this event, this diplomatic exchange, and revealing the amorphous nature of collaboration between artists from different backgrounds,

experiences and cities, with nothing in common but the sheer desire to learn from one another.

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PROJECT 2011: FACE TO FACE

Through Dec. 11 at Artisphere, 1101 Wilson Blvd., Arlington; 11 a.m. - 11 p.m. Monday-Friday; 11 a.m. - 2 a.m. Saturday; 11 a.m. - p.m. Sunday.