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REVIEW

Conflicts, inside and out

NORTHAMPTON artists Lydia Nettler and Harriet Diamond have shared an art studio for years, oftentimes collaborating on works that ingeniously combine widely different styles and approaches that reflect their "other" lives — the ones outside the studio.

In a joint — but this time not collaborative — exhibit, "Imperatives," on view at the Northampton Center for the Arts, each has created an installation, which expresses their personal responses to fear, conflict and war, in one of the two third-floor galleries.

Nettler, a therapist, focuses on enigmatic psychological matters, while Diamond wears her political activism on her sleeve, creating scenes of vigils and protests she has joined against the war in Iraq.

In "Break Away," Nettler has built an environment based, she says, on Northampton's own environs, in which she explores personal conflicts with the "war at home" and her individual quest for "peaceful disengagement."

The focal point of Nettler's intentionally ambiguous installation are a collection of barren logs and



tree trunks, created with charcoal drawings on papier mache sculptures, which are at once creepy and inviting. One log that dominates the center of the gallery is felled, while the others stand tall like armless sentries, towering over the room.

The viewer will feel compelled to step into Nettler's stark forest and to walk among the trees with their realistic knots, rings and peeling bark ingeniously created of paper and charcoal. But there is an inherent gloom in the nearly colorless forest of

gray and white trees. Perhaps this is what a nightmare looks like to those who don't dream in color.

Where Nettler's work is cryptic, Diamond's is forthright. Her terra cotta and wood sculptures, which include tiny figurines of participants in local and national peace marches and vigils, are a direct response to her involvement in the peace movement in Northampton, she says.

Whether a free-standing three-dimensional sculpture like that depicting thousands of protesters she

encountered at a New York City rally against the war, or a relief work, like the one of a local group called "The Raging Grannies," area women who sing clever peace songs at Northampton events, each intricate piece sets a scene and tells a story that is near and dear to the artist.

"I've never made a piece of art that is quite so explicitly political," Diamond writes in an artist's statement. "But I chose my subject matter from the heart and this thing has moved me."

Among the most engaging of the pieces is "Northampton Vigil," that focuses on local protesters who have gathered along Main Street in Northampton ever since the government imposed sanctions on Iraq in 1998. Tiny clay figurines stand on the line, holding signs that read "Use words, negotiate," and "Love our troops hate our policy" — words that Diamond has etched deeply, as if with a child's hand, into the clay.

Diamond's work is earthy, rich, colorful and dense in both format and meaning. So clear is the emotional content of the work that one can very nearly still sense the touch of Diamond's hands and heart on the clay.

Each figure she creates is a tiny portrait, Diamond says, of someone she has seen or come to know. In her Northampton piece, for example, look for Frances Crowe, with her signature shock of white hair, who has stepped from the vigil line to talk to a couple of uniformed soldiers. Not far away is another familiar local figure — peace activist, Claudia Lefko, who is deep in conversation with a mother who sometimes comes to the Saturday vigil with her two young children.

Take the time to closely investigate all her pieces as they hold myriad intricacies that are fun to uncover — like a passerby at the vigil, carrying greens from the nearby Farmer's Market.

"My sculpture springs from the same instinct as a family photo album — the desire to record, the need to remember and the knowledge that our personal histories are important."

"Imperatives" by Lydia Nettler and Harriet Diamond will be on view through June 29 at the Northampton Center for the Arts, located at 17 Net South St., Northampton. Hours are Tuesdays through Fridays from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Saturdays from noon to 4 p.m. For information, call 584-7327 or visit www.nohoarts.org.

— KATHLEEN MELLE