

After the Storm, Rethinking a Riverscape



COLLABORATIVE Beth Dary, above, worked with Sarah Lutz on "Interplay," which began as a dreamlike installation based on the evolution of the Byram River but was expanded to include a third player: Hurricane Sandy. The exhibition, at Miranda Arts Project Space, includes "Drawing No. 9," right.

By TAMMY LA GORCE

PORT CHESTER, N.Y.

FOR the first collaborative residency at Miranda Arts Project Space here, the director, Patricia Miranda, combed through several dozen proposals last summer and eventually settled on one from a pair of New York City-based artists, Beth Dary and Sarah Lutz.

Then Hurricane Sandy hit, and what began as a two-woman effort to transform the 800-square-foot space into a dreamlike riverscape based on the evolution of the nearby Byram River, complete with handmade barnacles and colorful anemone-like creatures, expanded to include what Ms. Miranda called a third player: the storm itself.

The hurricane arrived "when we were here talking about the environment and rising tides and how we as communities can become involved and aware," said Ms. Lutz, a painter, during a recent tour of the exhibition, called "Interplay," which will run through Jan. 19.

After the storm, "it was almost like the collaboration expanded to include the actual water. The fact that they had started with the idea of water, and then Sandy hit — it became more poignant," said Ms. Miranda.

Visitors to the exhibition have felt that poignancy as fully as the artists, said Ms. Miranda. At an opening talk and reception on Nov. 17, "we had standing room only, with people lined up out the door. And what was so great about it was, it wasn't just art talk about the materials and the creative process. It was people from this community coming together to talk about their concerns and their experiences with the storm. People really are making that connection," she said.

Ultimately, the show has turned up the volume on a dialogue Ms. Miranda, 49, of Manhattan, said is "always happening in my own head": What happens when beauty and difficulty — in this

case, nature's fury — interact?

Neither Ms. Dary, 46, of Brooklyn, nor Ms. Lutz, 45, of Manhattan, considered herself a political or environmental artist before putting together "Interplay." Both commuted daily to Port Chester to work on the show for about a month in the fall; the residency required them to use the gallery space as a studio. Each had woven watery themes into prior work, though, and Ms. Dary's fascination with marine life — she concocted the colorful barnacles made of clay and paper pulp that protrude from the gallery's white walls — extends back to 2005, when she was living in New Orleans, during the time of Hurricane Katrina.

"After Katrina, the barnacles started to grow out into where people were living. They're very strong, and they build their communities quickly. They have a tenacity to them that allows them to survive. And that's the way people are as well," said Ms. Dary, a sculptor and video artist.

When she and Ms. Lutz first began thinking about how they might secure the residency, natural disasters and the need for barnacle-like tenacity weren't

on their minds as much as the less-immediate threat of rising water levels. One of Ms. Miranda's criteria for artists applying for the residency was that the work have a local element.

"So we thought about the history of Port Chester, how it's been a shipping town and a shipbuilding town and a fishing town, and we decided to look at mapping the Byram River," said Ms. Lutz, who met Ms. Dary seven years



IMAGE COURTESY OF MIRANDA ARTS PROJECT SPACE

Asking what happens when beauty and nature's fury interact.

ago at the Manhattan school both their children attend. They looked at the lines and topography of the river, as well as the Long Island Sound, and scaled the maps to fit the walls of the room.

The result is less a diagrammatic display of the river's physical characteristics than a subtle presentation, using a zigzag of lines, of how it flows.

The most striking of the lines may be three faintly drawn horizontal ones that run along the walls of the rectangular room. The lowest line represents the water level at the turn of the 20th century; the middle line, at five feet, represents its current level. The top line, close to ceiling height, represents the river's expected water level 100 years from now.

"You can't help but think about how the water levels are going to affect people. It's something we thought about a lot after Sandy hit," Ms. Lutz said.

They also thought about it before the hurricane, though. During the creation of the ephemeral show — the walls will be erased for a new exhibition later this month, leaving only a series of framed drawings behind — Ms. Dary visited the local library and copied pages from a

100-year-old local directory. Ms. Lutz then incorporated bits of those pages, plus scraps of pages from current Spanish-language telephone directories (a reflection of Port Chester's large Latino population), into spirograph-style shapes that she drew on the walls near the barnacle clusters. The names, in print, are meant to represent the mingling of individual lives with the life of the river itself, both then and now.

For Ms. Miranda, connecting the show to Port Chester was a prerequisite because "I'm interested in art spreading beyond super-concentrated areas like New York, where there's this really dense center. I wanted to explore how I could engage the artistic community in a less dense, more micro community."

She is equally if not more interested, she said, in pressing deeper into how "Interplay," which is pleasing to the eye with its soft shapes and colors, might affect the way viewers think about environmental issues — "again, what role beauty can play in something challenging."

At the opening reception, an environmental scientist, Pam Solo, president of the Civil Society Institute, which is based in Newton, Mass., came to speak alongside the artists.

"I asked Pam, 'What do you think as a scientist? Could a show like this have any impact?'" Ms. Miranda said. "She said, 'Beauty can open a window on how we think about things in a way that doesn't.' I've been really gratified by that," Ms. Miranda said.



TENACITY Barnacles made of clay and paper pulp cling to the gallery's walls.

"Interplay: A Collaborative Residency" is on view at Miranda Arts Project Space, 6 North Pearl St., Port Chester. For further information: (914) 318-7178 or mirandaartsprojectspace.com.