

Sculptor Invites Writers To Tell The Stories Of Her Works At Real Art Ways

By Susan Dunne



While walking through an art gallery, it's easy to wonder what the artworks would be thinking if they were real people. What their stories are. What their gripes are. Why they have those looks on their faces. Why they're carrying those bundles, what's in the bundles. The stories gallery-goers think up could be funny or sad, mysterious or straightforward, and may change over time, just for fun.

Melissa Stern wondered these things about her own creations. However, she wasn't interested in hearing her own versions of her sculpture's stories. She wanted to hear other people's.

"People look at my art and ask 'What does it mean?' I respond the way therapists do, 'What do you think it means?'" Stern said. "I'm more interested in what you think than what I think even if it's negative and provocative. It doesn't matter why I made it. It matters what you think of it."

The Freudian "The Talking Cure" is the perfect title for Stern's exhibit, now at Real Art Ways in Hartford. Stern, a New York-based sculptor, created a body of work using her signature style: clay figuratives, tall and thin, usually genderless, missing limbs or eyes. She hired 12 writers in a variety of disciplines — screenwriters, fiction writers, horror writers, comic-book writers — to make up a story about each artwork. Then she hired 12 actors to read the stories. Using QR codes and a cellphone app, visitors to the gallery can hear the stories that have been made up about Stern's artworks.

"They write what they thought my sculpture was thinking, with no censorship or input from me," Stern said. "It had a lot to do with the idea of letting go. That's what therapy is. I had to let go of what I thought about the work, and then the writers had to let go of the writing and trust the actors."

Each writer left his or her story open-ended. "Think of the pieces as short stories where you provide the ending," she said. "There can be all sorts of interesting endings."

When the gallery is full of visitors and each is listening to an artwork's story, "there will be a soft, constant murmur of voices, spooky and magical," as if the statues are actually talking, she said.

So the sculpture called "Stainless" is brought to life by Sarah Langan: "When I was a little girl I used to hide under the stairs because of the yelling. I cut my hair short so it would stop getting pulled. Cut all kinds of things. But you'll never know that. I'd never burden you. We're all damaged. It's how well we hide it that counts."

A three-figure piece called "Friends" is turned into a perverse little relationship drama by Janet Grillo: "I would have preferred it, maybe before we got married you could have, you know mentioned. Told me about this little guy. That he was part of the deal. You know, gonna be with us."

A two-character piece, with the look alike characters bound together with rope, is animated into an amorphous noir drama by Anthony Weintraub: "That's probably what they saw. They saw us as vulnerable. We gave them a way in. But it was me. It was me who let them in that day. I made a bad choice. I took a bad deal. It was me who got us involved in this bad plot, this unfortunate development, this turn of the screw."

Other writers involved in the presentation are Larry Fessenden, Susan Lewis, Arthur Medrick, Annie Nocenti, Valeria Luiselli, Julie Gilbert, Robert Burke Warren, Paula Sharp and Stern's son Max W. Friedlich, a student at Wesleyan University in Middletown.

Appropriate to the exhibit's title, it is being presented in partnership with Hartford Hospital's Institute of Living and the Hartford HealthCare Behavioral Health Network.

THE TALKING CURE is at Real Art Ways, 56 Arbor St. in Hartford, until May 25. The opening reception is Saturday, March 7, from 4 to 6 p.m. For details, including programming related to the exhibit, visit realartways.org.

This version was edited from a previous version of the story to correct the list of writers involved in the project.