

ART OF LIVING

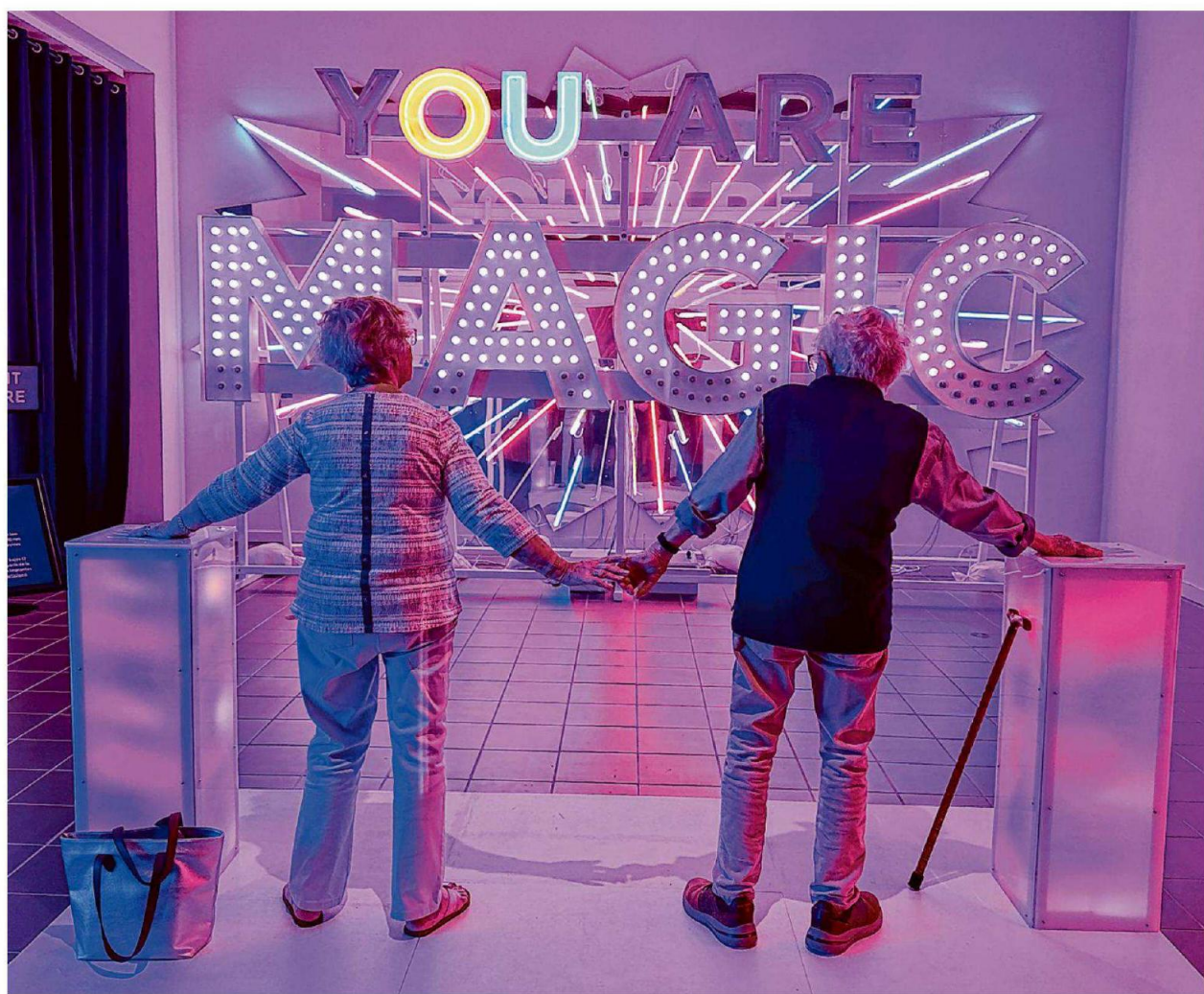
BEAUMONT ENTERPRISE • SUNDAY, MAY 19, 2024 • SECTION C

By Andy Coughlan
CONTRIBUTOR

When we visit a museum, the first thing we are told is not to touch the art. Guards stand around seemingly scrutinizing our every move lest we get too close. But sometimes, as with Alicia Eggert's exhibition at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas, the guards watch closely eager to prompt one to touch and interact with the exhibition.

"All the Light You See," on display through July 7, requires our participation. Entering the main gallery, we are confronted with a large barrier comprising 1,100 hand-cut ribbons. On it are projected the words "The Future Comes." On a visit with my parents, they paused, not knowing what to do. The guards softly said, "You can walk through it." They gingerly parted the ribbons to be faced with another curtain, this one reading, "From Behind Our Backs." Pass through that, to another, then three more (I'll let the viewer discover the full text).

This seemingly simple piece (if one counts 6,600 hand-cut ribbons, projections and colored lighting as simple) raises a lot of interesting questions. Do we gently part the ribbons to pass through or do we walk boldly into the unknown as if passing through a car wash (the piece was originally installed in a Dallas parking garage during the pandemic lockdown and has been reimagined for pedestrians)? Do we pause before each slogan and ponder it? Do we consider each text on its own merit or do we consider the six parts as a whole?



Visitors link hands to activate "You Are Magic," part of "Alicia Eggert: All the Light You See" at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas through July 7.

Andy Coughlan/Beaumont Enterprise

Beaumont museum has art you can touch

Collectively titled "The Future Comes From Behind Our Backs," each of the ribboned walls is a different colored material, with various shades within that color. The words are projected from the side wall so that standing straight on the letters causes them to blur out as they get further away

from the source, creating an abstract of light as the ribbons gently sway. The slower one goes, the more one sees. Or better still, the more times one visits, the more one can focus on the peripheral details.

Once the visitor has passed through the curtains, we are confronted by a large installation of

neon lighting and sound. "We Are Magic" literally cannot be viewed alone. It requires two people to reach across the divide to touch the hand pads or one is forced to stand before a wall that only hints at something wonderful. Once the circuit is made, the wall suddenly begins to light up, sounds

playing, as the randomized sequence flashes multicolored neon letters and lines. One feels as though breaking the connection will spoil the magic.

However, as the piece forces us to connect with each other, it is not until we finally let go of each other's hands that the full wall blazes color and

light. Then it is gone. A fleeting moment. The only way to recapture the moment is to find another hand to hold.

However, that moment is gone. The next experience will be different. The excellent gallery essay by Marin R. Sullivan focuses on the word "Now." The word, Sullivan writes, "conveys immediacy...but also a futile attempt to...categorize something that is gone as soon as it is named." Interacting with the work enables us to be present in the now, no matter how fleeting.

The exhibition also includes other wall pieces that incorporate text that changes as one looks at it. The neon signs on the side walls next to "You Are Magic" are red and blue as a nod to the upcoming elections.

Eggert's lenticular prints are photographs of neon signs constructed in landscapes. The text changes as one moves position in relation to the image. Words disappear to challenge the meaning. For example, "This Present Moment Used to be the Unimaginable Future" becomes "This Moment Used to be the Future."

AMSET is open seven days a week and admission is free, meaning there is no excuse not to visit "All the Light You See" often. Pop in for a minute just to feel the ribbons as you walk through. Pause in front of the texts and take in the messages. And if you find yourself standing alone in front of an unlit wall, ask someone for a hand. Connecting lights up the world.

The Art Museum of Southeast Texas is located at 500 Main St. in Beaumont. For more, visit amset.org.

How a local artist finds new uses for old items

By Andy Coughlan
CONTRIBUTOR

Jane Silvernail is an addict. You won't find her out on the streets begging for drugs, but she will happily take your quirky castoff objects to use in her art.

"I get inspired by all pieces that I have to put in my art and that's just what I do," she said. "I just can't stand it. It's like a disease. I have to do it."

Silvernail earned Best in Show at the Beaumont Art League's 2023 membership show and her reward was a solo exhibition, on display now through July 3.

BAL's gallery walls are packed with 80 assemblages, most completed within the past 18 months. Silvernail works every day surrounded by a collection of objects — relics and remnants.

"I love the old stuff, the broken stuff, and I try to give it new life," she said.

Silvernail finds things at flea markets or on the streets and said her friends are always bringing her objects they think she can use.

"I have a friend who does metal detecting and when he found out that I did this, he brought me boxes of remnants of things — I metal stuff that he found, and there's history in that stuff," she said. "And I like to bring it back."

The Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi centers on appreciating the broken and imperfect, and appreciating the lifecycle of everything.

"So, I try to use that and also nostalgia," Silvernail said. "I have very strong nostalgic personality. My basic (philosophy) when I started was I need to use metal, glass and wood. So, I've tried to use all those elements in practically every piece."

The sheer volume of objects in each assemblage is almost overwhelming. One cannot help but marvel at the amount of



Jane Silvernail earned Best in Show at the Beaumont Art League's 2023 membership show and her reward was a solo exhibition, on display now through July 3.

Photos by Andy Coughlan/Beaumont Enterprise

work involved. But Silvernail doesn't see it as work.

"I just do it because it's fun," she said. "And I have a tremendous amount of resources. People give me stuff to support my habit. I just pick out an object that I really like and sometimes it comes to me where it needs to be — sometimes it doesn't. The pieces that go together easily are fantastic. Some pieces just hang around and eventually get put into other artworks."

Silvernail points out a piece that is a collection of machine parts.

"It's abstract yet it's cohesive," she said. "I'm using old pieces that should go in the garbage, but they still have beauty and function in a piece of art."

The beauty in the work comes from Silvernail's vision of a life beyond an object's original function. Once that object has served its original purpose, be it a machine or a tin can, the tendency is to discard it. But Silvernail's art gives the old object a re-

newed sense of purpose, a new life. There is universal human truth in her creativity.

Not everything is trash. Some pieces incorporate pictures or letters from her mother or father, or other family members.

"Rather than having the items just put in a drawer, I try to use them to get them new life," she said. "I don't really research, but I am looking into the pieces that I have and try to draw a story out of it. I really don't want to be too thematic. I like the viewer to make their own story."

The works contain everyday objects that viewers will connect with. Maybe it's a photograph of a woman that looks like one's grandmother. Maybe it's an old wrapper from a childhood comfort food or a favorite toy. Silvernail's work is affordable and draws people to it.

"I think it does spark a memory or two in people, that's all I can think," she said.

Most of the pieces are relief



panels designed to hang on the wall. Silvernail said people have more wall space than they have shelf space.

"I think it fits their needs better than something that would take up a lot of room," she said.

Silvernail hopes that people buy her work, if only to clear space for more pieces. As an addict, she is compelled to keep creating. And there are more objects are out there waiting to

be rejuvenated. It is easy to sum up her process.

"I guess it's an appreciation for broken mismatched pieces that come together to tell a story or make you feel good — it's as simple as that, really," she said.

BAL is located at 2675 Gulf Street in Beaumont. Hours are Wednesday through Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Admission is free and open to the public. For more, visit beaumontartleague.us.