

An artist shows her roots

Therese Pfeifer's water lilies reflect the influence of her travels

In the early morning light, Therese Pfeifer quietly slips out of her apartment in Delft, Holland. Clutching a plastic bag, she is a mysterious shadow hurrying through the old town, the same place Vermeer painted "Girl With a Pearl Earring."

Pfeifer's eyes are transfixed by the narrow canal teeming with water lilies. From a distance, the lilies dot the surface like thousands of Vermeer's pearls upon an ocean of green leaves. Initially she wants to capture them just as they are, a grand masterpiece of color, like a Monet. But she resists. Impressionism is water under the bridge.

Now at home in Columbia, the artist and MU professor's brown eyes are fixed on her paintings as if the art is speaking to her, and she is merely translating their story. "I don't know how much you know about water lilies," she says, seemingly lost in the memory. "I thought I'd just pick one and hold it in my hand."

This past summer, however, Pfeifer learned that people just don't go around picking lilies in Delft. Locals watched with baffled glances and whispered as she walked home with a handful of tiny white blossoms attached to long, dripping stems and roots.

Pfeifer was captivated by the long stems and decided to include them in her paintings. The lilies and her summer in Holland inspired "The Garden's Echo," on display at Cherry Street Artisan until Oct. 24.

Pfeifer has had several solo and group exhibitions, lived and been involved in the art scenes in Switzerland, France, England, Italy, Israel and Germany and traveled all over the world. But the most important journey, she claims, is on the inside. While studying drawing and painting at MU, she developed her own philosophy.

"Beauty in art is not the same as the beauty of a woman or a flower," Pfeifer says. "It's about being able to relate. It is about the thread that connects a person with a piece of art."

Even though she likes to spend countless hours in her studio, Pfeifer believes teaching contributes to her work. Teaching the basics forces Pfeifer to revisit her own foundation. Looking at students' works helps her identify issues with her own art. "Sometimes I look at a student's piece and think, 'I'm doing that exact same thing and probably shouldn't be.'"

Thirteen undergraduate students sit poised at easels. The blinds, partially closed, cast shadows over today's assignment. "Don't just look at the boxes," Professor Pfeifer commands as she meanders around the studio. "Think," she says.



COURTESY OF THERESE PFEIFER

Pfeifer's exhibit is inspired by her past summer in Holland. There she became enamored of lilies, which are currently the subjects of many of her works, including *Tamed II*, above.

"Where is the light? Where is the darkness?" As she speaks, students begin crafting images, while their dingy fingers sweep charcoal gently across blank pages. Pfeifer approaches each student, peers over his or her shoulder, nods thoughtfully and makes a suggestion.

Soon the students' pages fill with boxes, and charcoal finds its way onto their clothing and faces. "You won't hit it the first time," Pfeifer reassures them. Some have already begun erasing furiously and tearing off sheets. "You'll have to erase and add and erase and add. This is a process."

Being a professor allows Pfeifer the freedom to pursue her own styles and subjects. She believes artists are torn between

following what she refers to as an "inner calling" and painting something "that will match a couch" so it will sell.

Pfeifer cites Piet Mondrian as one of her unlikely primary influences. His bold colors and straight edges are a far cry from Pfeifer's gentle lilies, but studying his work encouraged her to "push it to the abstract." Pfeifer begins with vivid depictions of lilies and works them into blended colors and finally vertical and horizontal lines.

From portraits and landscapes to still lifes, Pfeifer has extensive roots in the art world. She has come a long way from drawing charcoal boxes during her classes at MU. And all you see are her pearls.

— ERIKA KELSEY

EXHIBIT INFO

What: "The Garden's Echo"

Where: Cherry Street Artisan

When: Through Oct. 24.

Hours: Mon.-Wed., 6:30 a.m. to 11 p.m.; Thurs.-Fri., 6:30 a.m. to midnight; Sat., 8 a.m. to midnight; Sun., 3 p.m. to 11 p.m.

Cost: free

Call: 817-9874

FROM STILL LIFE TO LIFELESS

Since Therese Pfeifer completed her M.F.A. in painting and drawing at MU in 2003, Columbia has gotten first glances at her works.

Her newest model sits quietly in her studio 24 hours a day. She doesn't eat. She doesn't breathe. She is able to hold very still. Once a portrait artist, Pfeifer has ditched her Dutch lilies for department store mannequins.

"She will sit for me forever," says Pfeifer. "I don't have to pay her, and I can put her in any environment I like."



GRACE'S GLANCE, COURTESY OF THERESE PFEIFER

"Beauty, the Monstrous, and Waiting" is on display at Columbia College until Sept. 30.

"I am touching on issues that relate to women," Pfeifer says. "My mannequin depicts how women are supposed to look, beautiful. The mannequin doesn't have legs or arms, and in that way it is monstrous and deformed. And because they have no arms or legs, they are always waiting, just as women are expected to be inactive and wait for their husbands to come home. But all humans are waiting on something."



WAITING FOR GODOT, COURTESY OF THERESE PFEIFER

Other artists have used mannequins, most notably New York photographer Cindy Sherman, who also used dramatic juxtaposition of human limbs. Sherman has been said to explore the disgusting, while Pfeifer sends a different message with her mannequin. In her paintings she tries to humanize it. "The mannequin serves as a metaphor for what all humans strive for and seek to bring to life against all the odds," Pfeifer says.

— RAEGAN JOHNSON