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Living the dream

After years of devoting most of her energy to family and business, Kate Cheney Chappell has re-engaged in her chosen career - making art that makes people think.

By BOB KEYES, Staff Writer

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One of the most meaningful pieces of feedback Maine artist Kate Cheney Chappell has received came from a 9-year-old girl who wrote in Chappell's guest book, "I feel I am with my inner self with this show."

The occasion was an exhibition Chappell mounted this past spring at the New Britain Museum of American Art, near Chappell's hometown in Connecticut. The show, "Inner Terrain," featured a broad array of monoprints, collographs and three-dimensional, mixed-media constructions.

The work explored a theme that Chappell has investigated for much of her artistic life: nature, the cycle of the seasons, and the connectedness between humans and the environment.

That a youngster picked up on it so readily impressed Chappell. "It was a profound statement," she said.

The Kennebunk artist thrives on life's big questions that do not have easy answers. With her artwork, she lives by the motto made popular by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who espoused, "Live the questions now."

That is what Chappell does whenever she creates a piece of art. "You certainly don't know the answers. But if you are willing to live in a questioning state, your work will help you find some glimmers of what can be a connection," she says.

As Chappell concludes one of the busiest years of a robust career, she is at peace with her inner self. As an artist, she is doing precisely what she has always wanted to do – make art in a variety of media and show it locally and regionally while garnering critical attention for her work.

That work is textural and tactile, evoking a level of physicality that goes straight to her background as a printmaker.

For years, Chappell focused most of her attention on the family business – Tom's of Maine, a maker of natural products that she co-founded with her husband, Tom.

Lately – and especially since the 2006 sale of Tom's of Maine to Colgate-Palmolive – Chappell has stepped away from most of the time-consuming aspects of the business and pursued her art full-bore, working at a breakneck pace that at times has left her exhausted but also revving on creative energy.

ENFORCED SLOWDOWN

This year, she had no choice but to slow down. She contracted Lyme disease during the summer and developed Bell's palsy.

Chappell went into what she calls summer hibernation at her home on Monhegan Island, spending time writing poetry and painting while giving herself antibiotics intravenously every day. Very tired, she allowed her body the time it needed to recuperate.

By summer's end, she was back on her feet, painting with watercolors as she did 25 years ago.

"I just went into the woods and painted watercolors, or out on the rocks, or in my yard," she said. "I couldn't walk well. I used a golf cart to get around. I did plein-air painting. I closed my studio.

"I just decided I needed solitude. The body tells you what it needs. I just followed."

Chappell's summer shut-down followed one of the busiest periods of her career. The spring show at the New Britain Museum of American Art was a milestone, because it involved a range of work and strengthened her regional following.

The exhibition received critical praise in publications such as Art New England and attention in Yankee Magazine and numerous local newspapers.

The show also led the museum to purchase one of Chappell's creations, "An Explosion of Amphibian Deformities," a mixed-media piece inspired by an article in National Geographic about the loss of species – frogs, specifically – to environmental changes.

Chappell's year included two other benchmarks: the opening of the Kate Cheney Chappell Center for Book Arts at the University of Southern Maine in Portland, and the sale of an edition of prints created by Portland-based Peregrine Press to the Portland Museum of Art, the University of New England and the New York Public Library. Chappell is a member of the printmaking cooperative.

SPECIAL THANKS TO USM

For Chappell, her financial gift to USM to establish the book-arts center was especially meaningful. She decided to make the gift after the sale of Tom's of Maine because of the impact USM had on her artistic life.

She was a returning student at USM in the 1980s, after taking many years off from art-making while attending to the business and raising a family. Enrolling at USM enabled her to reconnect with her art, and set her on the path she is on today.

And that is the path of a full-time artist – her life's dream.

With a busy 2008 behind her, Chappell is back in her Westbrook studio working on her next body of work. She has no major exhibitions on the horizon, which she calls a luxury because it means she can think freely without worrying about producing.

She plans to do a winter residency at the Vermont Studio Center, where has gone before to regroup.

"It's a good place to think," she said. "That's where I go to get ideas to continue in my studio. That's what I am looking forward to right now."

Staff Writer Bob Keyes can be contacted at 791-6457 or at:

bkeyes@pressherald.com

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