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Almost invisible art: Once you notice it, 'Heightened Curvature' will change your perception of space

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Discovering a giant banana spider's translucent overnight takeover of my front porch was reminiscent of finding University of North Carolina Wilmington art professor Andi Steele's monofilament wire installation in UNCW's Cultural Arts Building. Both have hundreds of barely visible strands stretched from wall to wall, completely changing the nature of the space, and both might take a while for you to notice.



photo by Briana Brough

In the pink: UNCW art professor Andi Steele, beneath 'Heightened Curvature,' her installation of monofilament wire.

Perhaps because Steele's installation, titled Heightened Curvature, is seven feet from the floor at its lowest point, several UNCW students asked me, while I was taking notes, what I was looking at.

"It was as close as I could get to interacting with people without intruding," Steele said.

Steele's red strands – monofilament wire is commonly called fishing wire – are spaced evenly, like harp strings, forming mathematical planes. Each plane, 42 strands, is tied to vertical eyelets in one corner of the room and to horizontal eyelets in another corner, creating a gorgeous middle twist where the red color collects, suspended in air. It was about as easy to assemble as Ikea furniture, taking four days and three other people.

Dead on, the installation is symmetrical. Two planes rise and spread above the entrance to the theater, wrapping around the second-floor balcony's spokes and crossing each other to create an invisible picnic tablecloth pattern in the overlapping diamond.

Though easily missed, the installation is more visible during the day when the tall windows let in sunbeams to streak strips of Heightened Curvature a fluorescent red. Before people notice it, "they'll get that feeling that something's not the same," Steele said.

"The early ones I did were mostly (with) clear (wire)," said Steele, whose graduate studies at the University of Georgia were in papermaking and blacksmithing.

For her first installation, Steele tacked off the back corners of a warehouse with



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fishing line bars and, as the audience walked toward the art they could not see, they instinctively moved toward the center. Part of them knew.

Possibilities opened up for Steele's installations, "what it could do," Steel said, "how it could change space."

This piece cuts and divides the space in different ways from different angles, making the room seem bigger, smaller, haunting, docile, out of proportion, perfect, ugly, stale, beautiful. Twisted groups of strands resonate tension. The life span of a singular strand changes from inanimate to sentient and back as it crosses the room

"What's so funny is that I'm not really that mathematically inclined," said Steele, who is self-taught in the 3-D computer program TurboCAD, which she uses to help design her site-specific installations. She doesn't know the slopes or equations behind the planes (perhaps a field trip from the physics department is in order), but her precise measurements and stringing order – like knitting, if you mess up the order of one loop, you have to tear out every loop after – make the real-world result look flawlessly computer generated.

Passers-by were heard critiquing the installation's subtlety, temporariness and unlikelihood of being sold, but those reasons are exactly why Steele loves this type of work.

"It has to be experienced," Steele said, displaying a little bit of rock star attitude to go with her rock star name.

Steele has done a commission for a private installation and has a solo show in Rock Hill, S.C. next summer. Her site-specific work is a little reward for getting outside of the space between your ears and getting into the silent transformation of the familiar, previously dead space around you, and appreciating it while it lasts.

During our interview, a harried Star-News photographer assigned to our case heads in, making a beeline for the nearby gallery that houses the rest of the group exhibit by the UNCW faculty Heightened Curvature is a part of. Steele points up to the faint pink web, and the photographer's face falls at the task of photographing almost nothing.

Steele smiles, and says, "I get that reaction from photographers a lot."

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