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'Mountains' a tour of thin wire and space

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If you were to drive down Hanover Street between 6 and 9 p.m. on Friday and glance into Cape Fear Community College's Wilma W. Daniels Art Gallery, you wouldn't see paintings on the neutral beige walls. You'd see gallery-goers, grouped in the middle of the floor, peering at, from your view from the street, nothing.

Your eyes would be mistaken.

Those cheese-plate-and-wine-bearing patrons somewhat awkwardly meandering through the seemingly barren gallery would actually be peering at, through and working hard not to bump into "Mountains," Andi Steele's newest site-specific and space-altering installation of monofilament wire, her largest-to-date,.

The Daniels Gallery appeared empty from the parking lot when I visited Steele, an assistant professor of studio art at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Inside, she was nearly halfway done with the installation. Mountains of red monofilament wires formed along the gallery walls, strung from the baseboards to the ceilings, anchored to brackets carefully painted to blend into the gallery. Slopes rose from the floor of the surrounding hallways, elevating to the ceilings of the open space. At 2,470 square feet, this is a big room to fill.

"It is a lot of planning," Steele said, taking a break from stringing red wire. "But if I spend the time on that part, then when I come to this part, usually, it goes relatively quickly. I'm usually pretty accurate where I want things to be. I had to make some adjustments in here just because the space is long. It's pushing the material to the limits of what it wants to do."

Creating an odd feeling

Not only is the big Daniels Gallery space a new challenge, but this is also the first time Steele has run her wire diagonally from the ceiling to the baseboards.

"I usually go off the top in verticals," Steele said. "And that's what gave me the idea of mountains, this idea of growing up. I'm hoping, when everything's together, you'll be able to see the exterior view of a mountain form, and you'll have that feeling of being able to walk inside of them."

Being surrounded by mountainous walls of thin red wire is a bit of an odd feeling. For one, it can be difficult to see the wire. One of the college's custodians had to pass



Photo by Matt Born

Andi Steele, a UNCW assistant professor in the department of art and art history, stands next to her 'Mountains' installation in Hanover Art Gallery in Wilmington.

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through the gallery while Steele was working one night.

"I basically led him through," Steele said. "He was like, 'I don't have my glasses, I can't see it. Just tell me where you want me to go.'?"

At overlapping crosshatches of monofilament, the red thickens and becomes easier to see. But even then, it tends to play tricks on your depth perception. And when you're not gazing at a red junction of crisscrossing wire, your peripherals are picking up on the strings around you. It can feel like you're standing in a small closet, surrounded, but you're looking at a large, empty room.

"It really can have that shut-down effect and stop you or shift you or slow you down, at least for a little bit," Steele said.

Steele's work forces viewers to pay attention to their immediate surroundings, raising their awareness of their perception of space, and then redefining it. The installation is geared to play with the viewer's perspective, and in that sense, the viewers play a crucial role in the installation.

"Part of what I'm interested in is that confrontation," Steele said. "You're not expecting it, and then something's right there and you have to take a second to look and get your bearings again before you can continue to move through.

"But I'm also very careful about leaving space for people to walk. I'm trying to balance those two things: That confrontation altering what we would normally perceive this space to be, but then also creating something that's interesting to look at that will carry you from one thing to the other, even if you have to work to make it through the whole piece."

A fleeting exhibition

As with most site-specific installations, when "Mountains" comes down in mid February, the piece is over. I asked Steele if, after all the work that goes into such a large installation, the ephemerality of the process gets to her.

"Over the past couple years (the installations have) gotten more and more involved," Steele said. "I've been able to show in bigger spaces. It used to be it didn't really bother me, because it's part of it. And I know that a part of doing site-specific work is it's got to come down usually. But it is getting harder and harder. I want millions of people to come and see it," she said, laughing. "I don't mind it just being up for a short amount of time, but I'd like it to have the most impact (possible)."

It doesn't help that the installations are difficult to document.

"Images of it can be interesting in and of themselves," Steele said, "but, especially at this scale, it's not going to capture the whole thing ... It's an experiential thing to walk into this and have to meander through it. You really become part of it."

And so, if you were to drive down Hanover Street between 6 and 9 p.m. on Friday and only glance into the Daniels Gallery, you'd be missing quite a lot.

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