

Advent calendars repurposed

By John Seven, North Adams Transcript North Adams Transcript

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NORTH ADAMS -- It's a recent tradition for artist Melanie Mowinski to use the form of Advent calendars in her art, but it's a potent one for her.

Mowinski is creating new Advent works and posting them online, while last year's concoctions are being sold at MCLA Gallery 51's '99 and NINE: We Are Mused!" Show.

Advent calendars hold a fascination for Mowinski on multiple levels, from the personal to the religious to the historical, in regard to the history of printing and the way humans mark the passage of time.

She also sees the work as the result of one of her artistic practices, informing another in ways that they haven't previously interacted.

"I have these two practices, my printed work and my other work," Mowinski said. "I think the reason I started to do it last year, it sort of evolved out of the monthly mantra cards that we make at Press Gallery, that sense of wanting to have something that is inspiring, but also artistic and creative and a practice, all rolled up in one, that I could do quickly. Like when I make those cards, that takes longer. I want to do something that had the limits of the monthly mantra, but in a daily practice, and then related to Advent."

Mowinski create 18 of the 5- by 5-inch collages last year, and she has done the same this season. They aren't strictly Advent calendars, but instead inspired by them. Each creation gives a description of what Advent day it was made.

Mowinski's experience with the form dates back to childhood and a very Catholic upbringing.

"Going to church and celebrating the different liturgical seasons was, and is, really important in my history, in my family's history," she said, "and then my mother, I think she made this really groovy felt Advent calendar. It had little pins that you would unpin a little felty gift thing and you would put it into the little tree. I remember loving that whole process. Every day you got to do something."

Anticipation and preparation are, to Mowinski, central to the experience, but her concept of what is being anticipated and prepared for has changed as she has gotten older.

"I thought of it more as Jesus' birthday and Christ's coming and all of that more religious speak," Mowinski said, "but now I think of more about the coming of light and the coming of peace, and the sense that heaven is right now. You create your heaven on earth, and you create your hell on earth, and the sense of the season, of Advent, of anticipation and preparation, for me it's a reminder of this practice to try and be a peaceful, loving human on a regular basis."

An important part of Mowinski's current process for the collages is the re-use of items she already has, rather than purchasing materials.

"By internationalizing that process, by making something from things that I don't buy, but things that I have and things that I find, it's this whole big metaphor of living for me," she said, "of how do we make beauty,

how do we make goodness, how do we make peace from what we have? Sometimes what we have might look like it's junk or trash, but really when you combine it with other things and intention, it becomes this beautiful thing."

In a way, reuse is as much a part of the personal tradition for Mowinski as the calendar form itself.

"This is how I picture the one my mom made when we were growing up," said Mowinski. "And we reused it every year. It wasn't like you did it and threw it away. We reused it. Even later on, we would get paper ones, and we would take them out and use them again."

Mowinski notes how the calendars have changed through the years. When she was a kid, and even into the '90s, they were most prevalent as true religious items, usually with scripture written on them related to the liturgical calendar.

"These advent calendars would sometimes have something that would tell the story," Mowinski said. "The stories tend to follow the annunciation, and the anticipation and preparation for Christ to be born in Bethlehem. Those scriptures typically follow that, so you might have come across a Biblical reading in some of the older ones."

Then commercialization took over, which is perhaps distressing to some of the faithful, but there's no denying that the Advent calendar as a form is a potent one beyond its original intention.

"It started in Germany, the whole idea of it," Mowinski said. "I've seen these German ones that are like little chest of drawers and you pull out a drawer and there's some kind of prize or gift in there. I bought a 'Star Wars' one for my nephew, so every day he'll make a new little 'Star Wars' Lego figure, anticipating Christmas. "

"Now, they run the gamut. Lots of designers have them. Lots of major museums have them. Some of them are going to be very, very liturgical and Biblical, and make reference to religious art, and some of them are going to be more fun -- not that that's not fun. There are going to be ones that are more something else, more commercial I guess. I'm sure there's a Hello Kitty one -- that would be really funny if there was."

As with so many serious, sacred items and holiday traditions, Advent calendars have been adopted in many secular ways now, and they can be used to countdown to almost anything you want. It's an applicable system to anything you hold important and want to mark.

It's also a call to get creative as you count down the days, which pulls back to the technology in printing that made Advent calendars even possible and continues through to the Lego calendar, where more is required of a kid than opening a door.

Mowinski's call is to perhaps take these thoughts to heart in devising your own Advent calendar -- or, perhaps, countdown calendar -- as a project, an activity, a result of creativity that celebrates the important event it is meant to herald.

"One of the cool things about it is that it was a printing kind of big idea, the sense of being able to have a score in a perforation in a printed piece that opens," said Mowinski. "When that first happened, I think it was in 1908 or something, that was kind of a big deal. That's a cool thing in printing history. How do you

figure out how to do these things that you take for granted now? Somebody had to figure it out, and the Advent calendar was one of those ways of figuring out perforation and scoring in the printing process. And you are doing something, you're opening something, but definitely where you've made something. I think it's really cool.

"If you just open something, it's over in a second, but if you're building something it's teaching that sense that you're taking the time to do something in anticipation of this special event. And if we frame it the right way I think it could be a very powerful meditation."

More of Mowinski's Advent art can be seen online at melaniemowinski.com.