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Artist has been using textiles to weave tales for 25 years

An exhibit of Newark woman's quilts on display at The Works

BY ANNA SUDAR
Advocate Reporter

NEWARK -- Mary Helen Fernandez Stewart is a storyteller.

But instead of using paper and ink, the Newark artist uses colorful fabric, beads and buttons to share her stories.

A textile artist for more than 25 years, Stewart, 59, specializes in making colorful art quilts.

"Everyone has a memory of a quilt," Stewart said. "From birth to death, a quilt touches you back."

"Whispers and Echoes of Women's Work," an exhibition of Stewart's creations, opened Friday at The Works and will run until July 30.

The pieces in the collection pay tribute to women who inspired Stewart.

"The whispers and echoes are from the women who have spoken to me in my life time about the importance of making sacred marks," she said.

The exhibition is dedicated to her mother, Rose Marie Wheatley, who died two years ago after battling Parkinson's Disease.

"I grew up in a family where our hands were our greatest toys," Stewart said. "And my mother encouraged me to continue learning throughout my life."

Stewart's mother and grandmother taught her to sew when she was a young girl.

"This (show) is a legacy," she said.

Although she has a sewing machine, Stewart prefers to sew her pieces by hand.

She collects fabrics, buttons and beads for her quilts and uses her journals as inspiration for her artwork.

One of her pieces at The Works, "Women's Work" was made from fabric from an ironing board and Scrabble tiles and celebrates the 1960s.

Another quilt, "Prayer for the Maasai Warrior," likely will be hung in the library at Ohio State University-Newark, when the exhibit ends.

"I want to leave a legacy for our community to show them someone from here can make a difference," Stewart said.

A graduate of Kent State University and Ohio State University, Stewart taught special education, math and physics for 20 years before she started exhibiting her artwork.

Her work has been shown in Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Paris, London and Greece. One of her pieces hung in the White House during the Clinton administration.

A former curator for Licking County Arts, Stewart also has been a long-time supporter of The Works.

"I've always been known as the 'art lady' here," she said. "The Works invited me (to have the show); they have been watching my work for more than 20 years."

Museum Art coordinator Lyn Logan-Grimes said she is excited to have Stewart's work hanging in the gallery.

"I was really impressed by her art work and how she connects her artwork with her personal life journey," Logan-Grimes said. "It is very inspiring, being able to use art to heal and to tell stories."

Stewart said she wants visitors to the gallery to feel connected with the women in their pasts when they see her work.

"I hope they walk away with an appreciation of how blessed we are with all the women who have come before us, especially the teachers and artists," she said.

Additional Facts

IF YOU GO

- **WHAT** "Whispers and Echoes of Women's Work"
 - **WHEN** Today until July 30. Gallery hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.
 - **WHERE** The Works Gallery, 55 S. First St.
 - **COST** Admission is free
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