

CNM to honor sculptor Karen Yank for her latest outdoor installation

By Wesley Pulkka / For The Journal

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Center section of the three-part “Growing Strength” monumental sculpture by Karan Yank outside the Jeanette Stromberg Library on the Central New Mexico Community College campus celebrates the power of community education and the beauty of the Southwestern landscape.

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Award-winning New Mexico sculptor Karen Yank is being honored with a dedication ceremony and reception for her latest outdoor installation, titled “Growing Strength,” as part of the Central New Mexico Community College’s 50th anniversary celebrations.

“Growing Strength” is a five-part 20-foot-tall CorTen and stainless-steel structure with aluminum seating sections that offers a truly interactive experience. Yank designed the piece to emblemize the power of education to strengthen the bonds of individuals with their community. Her plan includes elements that showcase the positive relationship between public education and the growth of both public and private life-enhancing institutions.



“Desert Primrose” by Karan Yank in the Academy Hills Park beautifully nestles into an urban setting while echoing the rugged western face of the Sandia Mountains.

Yank reaches back to ancient symbols and archetypes for her basic designs, which rely on the juxtaposition between geometric and organic forms. She aims to create a dynamic visual language with which to communicate abstract emotions.

Yank steadfastly eschews illustrative notions in favor of abstraction inspired by the viewer’s emotional response to memories and direct contact with natural forms including flowers, cactus, mountains, jagged cliffs and open meadows.

In several of Yank’s recent commissions floral forms play a large symbolic role. In our challenging desert environment, flowers have to be extremely tough to survive. Yank’s “Desert Primrose” in the Academy Hills Park acts as a frontispiece to the dry western face of the Sandia Mountains with its rocky precipices, struggling trees and hiking trails that are not for the faint of heart.

Both flowers and cacti play a role in Yank’s five-piece installation at Ladera Heights Park in Albuquerque. Each section is a combination of silhouetted and solid forms. It was Yank’s way to conserve material and labor costs without compromising the overall design and scale of the project.

The echoes of light and dark areas between the silhouetted shapes add an animated quality that simulates movement and inner life.

When Georgia O’Keeffe painted monumental flowers in the 1920s, she was rebelling against art academies that admonished female artists to avoid serious subjects like history and mythology and stick to lesser themes found in still life and portrait painting.

O’Keefe was metaphorically saying, “You want flowers? Here are flowers big enough to obfuscate the largest male-painted-period-piece.”

Thanks to her predecessors, Yank is not re-fighting those battles. Her flowers are symbols of growth, tenacity, fecundity and the ultimate power of the feminine that in her case includes marriage to master printmaker Rodney Hamon, childbirth and a successful career in the male-dominated medium of welded and forged steel sculpture.

Though she once entertained the idea of becoming a lawyer, Yank was born to be an artist and spent many hours learning the technical side of sculpture in her sculptor father Paul Yank’s studio in Wisconsin. Studio visitors included internationally renowned artist Alexander Calder and other notables who helped to inspire her creative imagination.

Later, Yank formed a lasting friendship with Agnes Martin, whom she met while studying at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Martin became a trusted adviser who helped Yank to stay focused on her career while inspiring a truly intelligent approach to art making.

“She was always there for me through the ups and downs of my sculptural development,” Yank said.

Yank earned her MFA at Rutgers University and has completed more than 40 public and private outdoor commissions in several states. Her most ambitious project was the sculpture installation on the pedestrian walkways at the Coors and Interstate 40 overpass. Her studio work is in public and private museum and university collections around the world.

Yank is represented locally by the Turner Carrol Gallery in Santa Fe, where she will have a special exhibition this month.

If you go Art review

WHAT: Formal Dedication ceremony for “Growing Strength” a three-part monumental sculpture installation by Karen Yank

WHEN: 3 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 10. Followed by an artist’s reception and discussion at 5:30 p.m.

WHERE: Central New Mexico Community College on the west side of the Jeanette Stromberg Library in the main campus.

HOW MUCH: Free

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