

Media Relations

Mother And Son Pursue Fine Art Degrees Together At UNH

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Joshua Torbick and Lennie Mullaney stand in front of Torbick's "Nest in Oak and Steel" on display in the UNH Museum of Art.

DURHAM, N. H. –Lennie Mullaney and Joshua Torbick create art in different mediums but that doesn't stop them from being able to offer each other value feedback about their work. Neither does that fact that they are mother and son.

Mullaney is winding up the first of a two- year Master in Fine Arts degree in painting at the University of New Hampshire. Torbick will graduate May 21 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in furniture design.

Both are nontraditional students so that in itself sets them apart in their support for each other. Mullaney comes to her studies after a lifetime of teaching school. Torbick spent two years at UNH before receiving a bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Virginia in 1999. After working in the field for a few years, he decided he wanted to study art and in 2008, found his way back to UNH. His mother arrived in 2010.

They share a house and a studio in Portsmouth. They carpool. Last year, when they were both taking a painting class, taught by the same professor but at different class level, they sometimes worked beside each other in the studio, critiquing each other's work.

Their art couldn't be more different—she works on canvas and he works with wood and steel and concrete. Her paintings are—painting size. His furniture looks more like large sculptures. Really large. "Floating Lounge", made of ash, steel and brass, is about 10 feet long. The red oak and steel "Nest in Oak and Steel" is about eight feet tall.

Yet the process, and even the end result, is the same.

"We are both responding to the materials we are working with," Mullaney says. "With any art, you have to be very present and stay with that."

Adds Torbick, "We are both exploring boundaries." He describes his work as something that might not be recognized as furniture from across the room. "First, you appreciate it as a piece of art. Then, you see it has a function.

"Most of my projects begin with an abstract. Next comes the process and then, what is it actually going to look like? It can take a real effort to turn an abstract concept into a physical thing," he says.

Mullaney's process is similar in that she starts with a concept and then responds to what's on the canvas.

Going to school with her son has made the two closer, she says.

"And it's really been a blast," Mullaney says. "For 10 years, we lived apart, seeing each other on vacations and at holidays. When we decided to share a house, it was rejoining our family as two adults."

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"We talk art 24-7," she says. "It's really pretty neat. We say, 'Let me see what you're painting' or 'what are you going to do there.' It's brought our relationship to a whole other level."

"Sometimes she's mom and sometimes she's a classmate. I can comment on her work and not have to like it just because mommy did it," Torbick says.

At some point, he will pursue his own MFA but for the immediate future, he wants to focus on his art.

"I have the opportunity to try to feed myself with my art for at least the next year so I'm going to do that," he says.

While he is doing that, Mullaney will continue to pursue her passion. She isn't looking at the MFA program as a means to a job. She decided to become a full-time student because she wanted to study on the most serious level she could.

"I didn't want to be a Sunday afternoon painter a year or two away from retirement. I wanted the professors to demand from me what they would from any student," she says, then adds, "I figure it will take the rest of my life to get some kind of satisfaction out of my art. I'll have to fail a lot before I get better."

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

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A photo of Mullaney and Torbick can be downloaded at http://www.unh.edu/news/img/Mullaney_Torbick.jpg
Cutline: Joshua Torbick and Lennie Mullaney stand in front of Torbick's "Nest in Oak and Steel" on display in the UNH Museum of Art.

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