LEGAME (BOND)

Design students explore mother-child attachment through installation and performances at the Venice Biennale: 56th International Art Exhibition

PAGE 2
How to heal a wounded world? That is the question posed to 48 Iowa State students who studied abroad last fall with the College of Design Rome Program and participated in the Venice Biennale 2015: 56th International Art Exhibition.

From Oct. 22-24, the College of Design presented “Biennale Sessions” in the Arsenale, the former Venetian shipyard, where renowned artists from around the world exhibit their contemporary work.

Students majoring in graphic design, interior design and integrated studio arts addressed the Biennale’s overall theme of “All the World’s Futures” through an exploration of legame (bond), said Rome Program Resident Director Pia Schneider, who coordinated the effort.

“In his opening address, Biennale President Paolo Barrata observed that ‘despite the great progress made in knowledge and technology… the world before us today exhibits deep divisions and wounds, pronounced inequalities and uncertainties as to the future,’” Schneider said. “We chose to interpret the broader theme from a psychological perspective and focus on the importance of the mother-child bond, with the goal of raising emotionally healthier, more resilient children—leading to a better future for humankind.”

The ISU sessions drew attention to the mother-child relationship in prison and the practice of separating women offenders from their children, in particular from their newborn infants.

Wounds and healing
Students formed interdisciplinary teams, each with a faculty adviser, to research and compare the approaches to this issue in the United States and in Italy. While in most cases, US newborns are separated from their incarcerated mothers within 24 hours, Italy’s law allows infants to remain with their inmate mothers for three years, Schneider said.

Beyond the constraint provided by focusing on “bond,” students were limited to working with only one material: gauze. This semi-translucent fabric, traditionally used for medical dressing, “related well to the theme of a wounded world and to the notion of bandaging, wrapping and healing,” Schneider said. “It also referenced the act of swaddling newborns and bonding with children.”

In late September, Schneider and several students visited the Rebibbia prison nursery in Rome to interview staff, childcare workers and inmates. They returned with photography instructor Serafino Amato to document an art therapy session that engaged mothers and children through play and dance with gauze. Other students and faculty visited the women’s section of the Giudecca prison in Venice. The interviews and images, together with other research, helped inform the installation and performance concepts the teams developed for the Biennale Sessions.

Playful and somber
From a wide range of initial ideas, students decided to create five oversized sculptures representing pregnant women and mother-and-child figures, which were constructed of gauze dipped in gesso draped on chicken wire.

“We built most of the torsos and arms in the studio in Rome and carried them on the train to Venice,” said Taylor Campbell, a senior in integrated studio arts from Pleasant Hill, Iowa.
At the Arsenale the students finished fabricating and assembling the figures and suspended them with fishing line from the domed ceiling lamps in the exhibition space. Gauze curtains surrounding the figures served as projection walls for animations and video related to issues of attachment/separation and children’s play experiences behind bars.

Students also developed two performance pieces—one playful and interactive, the other somber and contemplative—during which they embodied living sculptures, wrapped in and bound tightly to one another with gauze.

“The first performance was meant to be fun. We wanted everyone to participate—students as well as adult and child visitors to the exhibition,” said interior design junior Cristina Diaz, Aurora, Illinois. “The prop team blew up giant, medium and small white balloons to represent toys and we encouraged people to toss them back and forth with us and with each other.”

In the second performance, student pairs used large pieces of gauze to demonstrate different forms of attachment. “We hoped guests would watch and think about the bonding experience between mothers and children,” Diaz said. “We intentionally made it open to interpretation.”

Other teams were responsible for designing lighting, projection and sound; developing branding, including an event identity, website and posters; documenting the process and sharing the event on social media.

“We posted a promotional video on Facebook to show the design process for the exhibition. We did a timelapse during the installation setup using a GoPro camera mounted in the balcony for an aerial view,” said McLean Jinkinson, a graphic design senior from Clear Lake, Iowa. “We also did interviews with students and faculty throughout the session in Venice to include in a documentary.”

Crosscultural integration

The third day of the event featured a fashion show of 10 gauze garments designed and produced by women inmates of the Giudecca prison whose work detail is in tailoring. The prisoners received special permits to travel to the Arsenale and help dress students in the garments, some of which represented bridal gowns and maternity dresses.

The session ended with a colloquium intended to provide an opportunity to reflect on the installation and performances and further investigate the idea of mother-infant attachment as a critical basis for securing a child’s future. Invited speakers included members of the corrections communities, scholars whose work focuses on prison environments and health conditions of female inmates, and a representative of a nonprofit organization devoted to supporting children of incarcerated mothers through play and art therapy while in prison.

“One of our goals as a study abroad program is to expose our students as much as possible to the current social and cultural environment. Every semester, we devise new strategies for crosscultural integration, and the Biennale project provided such an opportunity,” Schneider said. “Our aim is to train our students to become culturally competent professionals with a great respect for other traditions and other values—another approach to achieving a peaceful future.”