

# “Swooning” over art: Contemporary Craft to open to the public

By Annabelle Walter, For The Pitt News

Art is something that has the ability to bring people together. Artist Swoon’s exhibit at Contemporary Craft, “The Heart Lives Through the Hands,” does this quite literally, bringing living people in close contact with surreal human figures.

The exhibition is the first at Contemporary Craft, a self-named “space for creativity,” since it closed its Strip District building for relocation last October. The gallery will open at 22% capacity on Thursday in its new Upper Lawrenceville building, and while the exhibit is free, visitors must reserve a timed ticket on the space’s website.

The first thing visitors see when entering the exhibit is an asymmetrical collection of church tiles, pieces that Swoon worked on while revitalizing an old church in Braddock, a nearby Pittsburgh suburb. Swoon has passed on this project to someone else this year, hoping to “make her sole living as an artist,” according to her assistant, Kate Lydon.

But these tiles weren’t just the work of Swoon. Lydon said while revitalizing the church, the artist enlisted the help of local children, teaching them how to create intricate designs on the tiles. This taught children a valuable skill while giving them a hand in revitalizing a building in their own community, Lydon said.

Stephanie Sun, the director of operations and finance for Contemporary Craft, said the church project in Braddock was one of the events that first introduced Swoon to Contemporary Craft. Although this is her first solo show in Pittsburgh, she has worked with the gallery before.

“I have many interactions with Swoon and have worked with her before. One of her works was in our social justice exhibition — “Mindful: Exploring Mental Health Through Art” in 2015 [and 2016] and has hosted a print sale in our space to fundraise for her Braddock church building revitalization project,” Sun said.

Another piece, “Dawn and Gemma,” depicts a mother and child. The piece is mounted onto a many-sided “found” object and created using a technique that involves layering paper and paint to achieve the desired result.

Visitors can view the pieces at a close range, which Contemporary Craft welcomes. Sun pointed out that the exhibition has no lines on the floor restricting access and/or movement, so visitors can get as close to the art as they want to.

Sun also said the choice to feature Swoon in the gallery’s new building opening hinged on the relationship between the artist and Contemporary Craft and their closely aligned beliefs and interests. She said she felt both parties are heavily invested in the greater Pittsburgh area, and aim to share art with which all people can identify.

“Her work is also incredible technically and visually diverse and tells human stories,” Sun said. “The sense of connection to people and the community through her art is one of the key reasons why we choose Swoon as our inaugural exhibition to open the Lawrenceville building.”

Contemporary Craft originally planned to open the new building in April, but had to delay the process due to COVID-19 safety concerns, Sun said. She noted that opening now is not ideal due to the pandemic, the organization felt it couldn’t afford to remain closed for much longer.



Courtesy of Contemporary Craft

Artist Swoon’s exhibit at Contemporary Craft, “The Heart Lives Through the Hands.”

"A huge part of the reason to open during the COVID-19 is for the sustainability of the organization. We have been closed since October 2019 due to the relocation," Sun said. "Without a proper space to welcome the public, we couldn't generate earned revenue."

Sun said the new building is well-suited to Contemporary Craft's needs — it was large enough to host classes, exhibitions and Contemporary Craft's store. The building was also within the organization's budget and required very little restoration.

"[The building] sparked ideas right from the beginning of how we can do very little in renovation to transform it into a space the organization needs," Sun said.

Sun said the organization worked with a group of museums and galleries to determine the best safety measures for reopening.

"We were able to learn from the group and carefully plan our opening and safety protocol that is suitable for an organization of our size," Sun said.

Sun also said seeing other galleries reopen and hearing enthusiastic responses from previous Contemporary Craft visitors convinced the organization to open its doors and safely welcome the Pittsburgh community into the new building.

"The successful reopening of peer organizations and the enthusiastic response from our visitors upon hearing the news of our opening, is really what encouraged us to move forward with opening," Sun said.