

Amy Biancolli: Tribute to a departed dear one

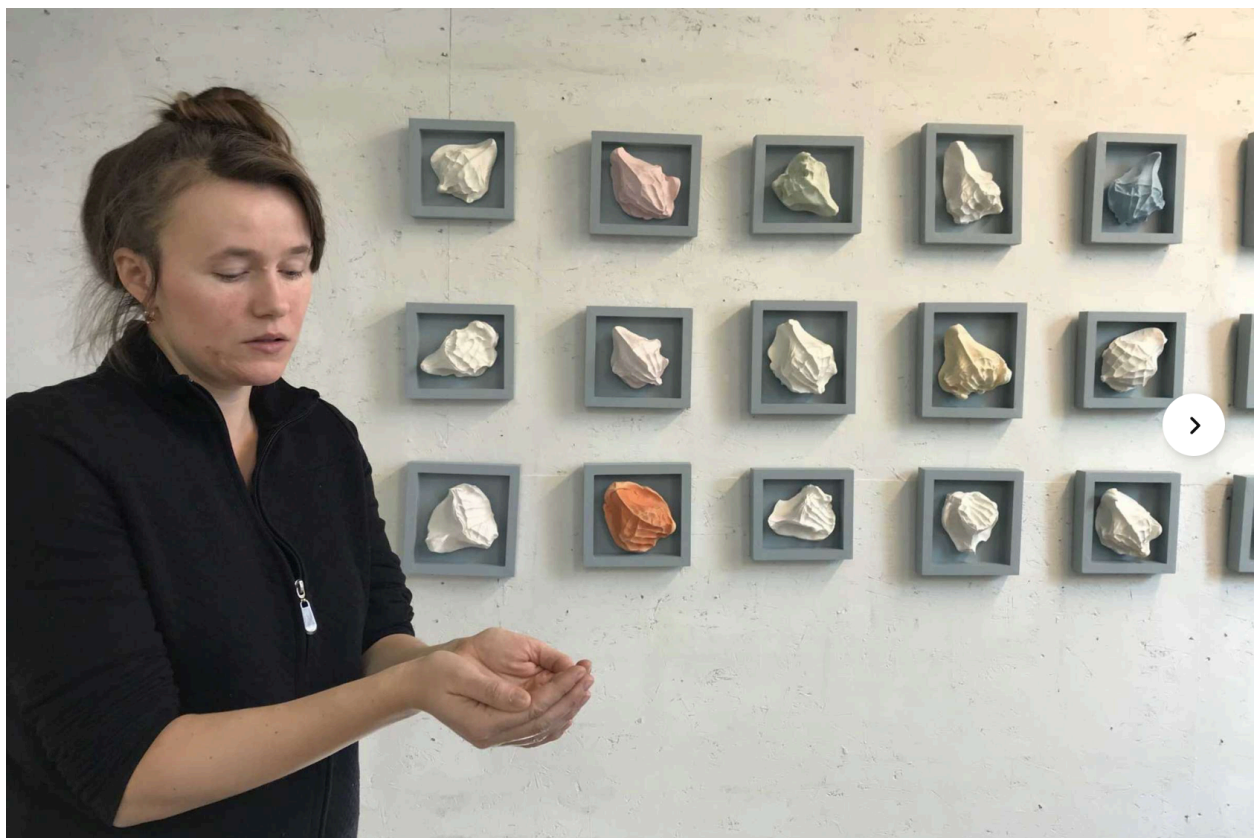
Artist says creations help keep late mother-in-law's legacy alive



Amy Biancolli

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Maryna Bilak with some of her pieces cast from the hands of caregivers (photo by Amy Biancolli)

Slowly, carefully, Maryna Bilak poured plaster into the cupped hands of Molly McCann-Mall and let nature take its course.

"That's the best artwork, I believe – you just let nature do its thing," Bilak said, standing in her warm Hudson studio on a frigid January afternoon. "So the nature of your hands will produce this beautiful, visual effect."

A diversity and inclusion director with the Alzheimer's Association of Northeastern New York, McCann-Mall had driven down from Albany last Friday to lend her hands, literally, to Bilak's art. Hers are among the many cast in homage to Bilak's late mother-in-law, who died last year of the disease, and those who cared for her.

Each pair of hands represents someone who helped the artist and her husband, Maurice Haughton, in their years with Dorothy. Each pair is a symbol with literal weight.

"Here they are — real hands of a real person who did something special for us. ... It's something that they hold in their hands," Bilak said. "And they were just so kind. I found through this period of taking care of Dorothy, people were just so kind."

Among those represented: "Actual caregivers, nurses coming to the house, drivers who took us to the hospital, physical therapists, doctors, neighbors who helped us just with food when we were overwhelmed." Included are those "who physically helped, who emotionally supported us, who provided us information."



Molly McCann-Mall, left, and Maryna Bilak with the artwork cast from McCann-Mall's hands (photo by Amy Biancolli)

All of those hands are part of Bilak's ongoing multimedia series inspired by Dorothy. Eighteen of the reverse-mold hand pieces were purchased by the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury, Conn. Eighteen more hang on the rear wall of her studio. Yet more works, including sculptures, frescoes, charcoals, paintings, will be on display in "CARE," an exhibit that will run from June 7 to Aug. 30 at the Derfner Judaica Museum in the Bronx. It replicates, with some differences, the show first mounted in early 2019 (by the same curator, Emily O'Leary) at Hudson Hall, the arts hub a couple of blocks down from Bilak and Haughton's home on Warren Street.

"The name I chose – 'CARE' –it's both ways," said Bilak. "It wasn't just care for Dorothy. It was care for me, for Maurice."

Her mother-in-law was a "wonderful model," she said. She had beautiful features — just perfect for painting, perfect for sculpture. "Working with her was such a pleasure. And she maybe didn't understand, on every dimension, what was happening – but she knew something special was happening. She really flourished in it ... So in that way, she was getting her care, and I was getting my care."

A native of Ukraine who studied in Prague before heading to New York City for a second MFA at the New York Studio School, Bilak met Haughton – a native of Jamaica – at one of her art openings on Valentine's Day 2014. That same year, Dorothy was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. They first lived with her in Queens, moving up to their red-bricked Hudson home in 2015. The following June, they wed.

Some people become live-in caregivers after 30 years of marriage, Bilak said. "We became caregivers during the dating period." In the thick of it they became parents, welcoming baby Irina six months before her grandmother's death.

Haughton recalled the initial, sad hints of the disease. It was eight years ago to the day, he said — Jan. 17, 2012. His birthday. "For the first time ever, my mom forgot to wish me a happy birthday." And he thought: something is wrong. So he brought her to her primary care physician, who assessed it as normal aging.

Two years later, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Two years after that, the exhausted couple — "we became, like, almost zombies," Bilak said – reached out to the Alzheimer's Association and met McCann-Mall, who was covering Columbia and Greene counties at the time.

As always when meeting with families, she educated them on the disease and laid out resources in the community. "But Maurice and Maryna really took it in and followed

through with everything — and really were like sponges," she said. "I noticed that right off."

Already, Bilak had thrown herself into her artwork, heading to the studio for solace. Already she was using Dorothy as her inspiration. And already, McCann-Mall said, they both could see the benefit in using the art as outreach — to raise awareness in telling a story of Alzheimer's. Two years later, Bilak's works — colorful, graceful, filled with emotion and insight — packed Hudson Hall.

The "CARE" show closed on March 17, 2019. The next morning, Dorothy died.

Less than a year later, reliving his mother's life through art — seeing her story told, and told again — isn't easy, Haughton said. "It is painful. But I'm happy I was able to help in any way I could. I mean, we dedicated a great part of our lives together, caring for her — because I didn't know any other way. But I miss her every single day. Every single day. I miss her, I miss her, I miss her ... I want to keep her memory alive. I want her to make a difference, you know."

Bilak, for her part, sees her mother-in-law everywhere. "Actually, I don't feel like I lost her — because she's living in my artwork. She's living in the memory of the people who come to my studio. We always talk about her. And then my daughter: She is just like her."

The energy between the two was evident from the start. Bilak didn't know she was pregnant when, one evening, she returned from her studio to make dinner — "and Dorothy was in the dining room in her wheelchair. And she starts screaming, 'There's a baby! There's a baby! There's a baby!'" Trying to calm her, Bilak started asking questions. Where's the baby? Over there. Is it a boy or a girl? A girl.

"Two weeks later," Bilak said, "I found out I was pregnant."

In the first ultrasound, the likeness was striking: Irina had Dorothy's profile. "I told Maurice, 'I'm carrying your mom inside of me.'" Her first cry was Dorothy's cry. Her first smile was Dorothy's smile.

Now an energetic 16-month-old, Irina resembles her grandmother more and more. On the television, Haughton pulled up an image of them curled on Dorothy's bed: the same high cheekbones, the same wide eyes. Across the room, a big bust of his mother — another Bilak original — faces the dining room. "We're gonna bronze that," he said.

Sometimes, people ask Bilak why she's still making so much Dorothy-centered artwork. "I don't know when I'm gonna stop," she said. "Because the experience is so rich, and maybe it's a lifetime-long experience that will never leave me. ... Who knows what the future brings?"

More cupped hands, almost definitely. The artist hopes to cast others who helped in some way, filling their palms with plaster.

McAnn-Mall stood there in the studio, the goop cold and wet at the start. As it set it grew hotter, a reaction caused by the addition of water. After a few minutes, it was hard.

"No rapid motions. Just kind of try to of shiver your fingers," said Bilak to McCann-Mall, who gave them a little wiggle. "Yeah. And you will start opening them slowly, again. ... Just open your hands. Yup."

Bilak lifted the plaster casting, then flipped it. It looked primordial, a fossil of something that crawled on an ocean floor. They both smiled.

"This is what's in your hands," she said.

"Oh, that's so cool," McCann-Mall replied.

But it was warm.

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Amy Biancolli was born in Queens, grew up in Connecticut and holds degrees from Hamilton College and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. A former movie critic for the Houston Chronicle, she first wrote for the TU from 1991-2000 and bounced back into the local-arts beat in 2012. She's published three books so far: "Figuring S--- Out: Love, Laughter, Suicide, and Survival"; "House of Holy Fools: A Family Portrait in Six Cracked Parts"; and "Fritz Kreisler: Love's Sorrow, Love's Joy." When she isn't consuming the arts or writing about them, she's fiddling around with the violin in a couple of bands, among them the gypsy-jazz group Hot Tuesday. You can reach her at abiancolli@timesunion.com or (518) 454-5439.