



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

'Caring Hands,' artwork by Maryna Bilak, on exhibit at the Mattatuck Museum's Rose Hill location in Waterbury.

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Dorothy is mostly gone by the time we set eyes on her. The portrait Maryna Bilak creates of her mother-in-law — in fresco, of all metaphors — is partial. The side of a face. The heavy eyelid snapped shut, the lips, like her memory, almost disappearing in the plaster.

Dorothy is the subject of a small-but-poignant exhibit at Mattatuck Museum, by Maryna Bilak. Actually, that's inaccurate. Caring is Bilak's subject. Dorothy, already folding into Alzheimer's disease by the time she became Bilak's mother-in-law, is the object.

"Caring Hands" consists of 18 plaster casts Bilak created from the

hands of those who cared for Dorothy. These are the hands that fed her, bathed her, combed her hair and grasped her hands as Dorothy disappeared inexorably into the miasma of forgetting.

And forgetting was what Bilak, a native of Ukraine, might have done with Dorothy, with whom she lived after she married Dorothy's son, Maurice. In the early years of their marriage, Bilak tried to burrow herself in her own shell, a "happy place" that had no vacancy for her ailing mother-in-law. But it was only when she confronted and then embraced the reality of caring for someone with advanced Alzheimer's, which she describes as "more insane than any work of fiction," that she saw the artwork in front of her.

"When the energy of denial exhausted itself," she wrote, "I decided to embrace my reality and consciously navigate and dedicate my creativity. Suddenly every-

Working against time is at its heart



A fresco of the artist's mother-in-law

thing made sense. I stared and began to see patterns in my artwork from the last five years — the time I have lived with my mother-in-law. She became my model, and the body I watched and touched so many times became an inspiration for the active studio process."

The exhibit opens with "Being," the singular glimpse of Dorothy's features, executed in the time-sensitive medium of fresco. In fresco, the Renaissance's favored media, the artist paints on freshly wet plaster, a mix of lime, sand and chalk. The artist mixes pigment — in this case a restricted palette of umber, sand and chestnut — into the plaster. So Bilak is effectively working against time, just as her subject was. It's an ingenious marriage between media and subject.

But caring is fugitive and therefore tricky. Had Bilak opted to depict it realistically, it might have emerged as cloying. Instead she literally embraces it, as

she did her mother-in-law's condition. Bilak asked each of the caregivers to hold their hands together, palm up, as if they were about to receive something. She then applied wet plaster to the hands and asked the sitters to wait the 10 to 15 minutes it took to dry.

What emerges are what look like 18 conch shells of varying forms, lengths and colors. All are painted in soothing pastels or not at all, and some are embedded with the folds of the sitters' knuckles, or the lines in their hands. It is enveloping and embracing, but ultimately friable and fragile — a bit like the caregiver himself or herself.

This exhibition, which takes place on the second floor at Rose Hill, the temporary home of Mattatuck Museum, may not appeal to all tastes. It is, after all, a series of plaster forms, arranged with understated precision, along facing walls. But for those willing to invest consideration into the tangibility of empathy, and how little trace it typically leaves, the exhibit will prove deeply moving.

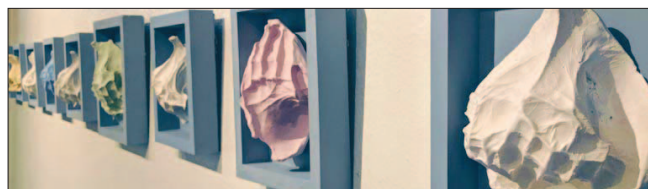
IF YOU GO

WHAT: Maryna Bilak's "Caring Hands"

WHEN: Through Jan. 5

WHERE: Mattatuck at Rose Hill, 63 Prospect St., Waterbury

HOW: 203-753-0381 or mattatuckmuseum.org



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