

ART OF LIVING

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The gallery walls are filled with people laughing, playing, grieving, loving. Evita Tezeno's beautiful collages offer us the full range of human experience.

The Port Arthur native's exhibition, "Piece of My Heart" is on display at the Dishman Art Museum through March 8. Drawing on a rich African-American folk art tradition, Tezeno's work is expertly composed, yet the artist's creativity imbues the work with joy.

The collages are created by attaching pieces of painted paper to a canvas. Tezeno said she spends days painting the paper which she separates out into colors. She graduated from Lamar University with a graphic design degree in 1984 and she carefully sketches out the composition on graphing paper, utilizing the grid lines for concision.

But once it comes to what Tezeno calls "painting with paper," she lets improvisation lead her. She said that she loves music (the show's title is taken from a fellow Port Arthurian Janis Joplin song), and the pieces have a rhythm and power that brings the figures to life.

Tezeno was awarded the prestigious Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in Fine Arts, and it should be noted that she is an example of good things come to those who wait. Now 65, Tezeno said that post-graduation she found women, especially Black women, were not in demand for graphic arts jobs, so she became a chef.

While continuing to make art, she was told her work was derivative — "everyone does impressionism," she was told. A woman of faith, Tezeno said she prayed on it and an angel gave her an idea. She was a design student in the days before computers, and the work involved a lot of cutting and pasting. She turned back to find a new direction.

Looking at the work, one gets the feeling of intricate quilts, another nod to a traditional African-American craft. Tezeno said she grew up surrounded by fabric, with family members constantly making things, although she has no interest in sewing herself, she said.

The richness of the works have amazing depth. The painted paper looks like fabric, or wood, or whatever she has allowed it to become. Sometimes she draws on top of the paper to add extra layers of texture. Working from the back to front, Tezeno con-

Port Arthurian gives pieces of her heart in exhibition



Andy Coughlan/Beaumont Enterprise

Evita Tezeno with her piece, "Summertime and the Livin' is Easy," part of "Piece of My Heart" at the Dishman Art Museum through March 8.



Evita Tezeno's "Let's Boogie Down"

structs the image across the pattern, in much the same way a skilled seamstress builds a dress.

Tezeno said she tries to balance the personal with the universal. But of course, the personal is universal. We share in the stories she is evoking. My own mother was a seamstress, and I see in these pieces the memories of fabric that Tezeno is sharing. To look at the portrait of her aunt and uncle, is to think fondly of photos of family who are long gone.

"Reflections on Times Past" is a beautiful portrait that is a eulogy for friends and family who are gone. Tezeno has populated the image with birds, each representing a lost soul, who is still connected to her. As with all her work, the pictured is not mournful as much as filled with joy of connections and memory.

Two large pieces were created specifically for the exhibition and draw on her memories of growing up in Port Arthur. "Summertime and the Livin' is Easy" depicts a crowded McFaddin Beach, a popular summer hangout. Part of the power of the piece is that it is not a dynamic exciting scene. There is no artificial drama. It is people — friends, family, strangers — simply living their lives.

"Saturday Night and the Hollywood Theater" depicts Tezeno and her friends at the now defunct cinema. Tezeno said she would sneak out with her friends to see movies — the marquee shows two of her favorites, "Car Wash" and "Superfly."

Again, it is another slice of life. Teens socializing on a Saturday. What could be more universal?

A particularly stunning piece is "Perfect Picture." It shows a couple, dressed in their Sunday best, posing as if for a portrait. Tezeno said the piece illustrates the desire for a perfect world, at least at home, although the outside world is far from perfect. It is the couple's desire to hold onto their dignity in the face of discrimination.

"Piece of My Heart" deserves multiple visits if only to allow oneself to constantly discover the small details that infuse the work. Tezeno is a fresh voice, however long it has taken to be heard. But then again, it's the experiences that make the journey.

The Dishman Art Museum is located at 1030 E. Lavaca on the Lamar University campus. Hours are Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-4 p.m., and Saturday, noon-4 p.m. For more, visit lamar.edu/dishman.