

Stroll or crawl through 'Model City'

Kendall Buster's art forces the viewer to take a unique perspective of uniformity.

Kendall Buster arrived at the Drake Anderson Gallery with her entire art exhibit packed in four standard-size duffel bags.



AMANDA
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Now installed inside the gallery, it is so huge that it forces visitors to duck, crouch or even crawl under it if they want to move past. That's only the half of it.

The piece, "Model City," on view through Dec. 17, works with several dualities, depending on which way a viewer wants to look at it. It is both beneath and above, large and small, scientifically and socially concerned.

"That's what art can do," Buster said. "It can really embody the oddest of contradictions."

After entering the gallery, a visitor might revert back to the days when, as a child, he or she played under a poofed-up parachute. A solid field of blue kite-like fabric is suspended above, illuminated by lights on the ceiling. It looks a little like a falling sky and gives an impression of being underwater.

In order to get the full effect, a visitor must walk into it, eventually slide underneath and come out the other side. A look back will reveal that

the visitor was initially looking at the bottoms of row after row of child-sized tents. From the top, the 80 tents look like a city of cool, blue, igloo-like dwellings that could house small inhabitants.

"What I hope to give is a sense of real scale shift," Buster said. "They're monumental, but then you are really big in relation to them."

Buster, who originally studied microbiology, likes to play with ideas of scale. Her pieces have often been likened to blown-up versions of objects that are best seen through

microscopes.

At the same time, she has an interest in architecture or styles of living. The elements of the piece also are examples of simple architecture. The tents are basically two arches with the fabric pulled taut, basic structures similar to those nomadic cultures would need.

"There is something interesting about the notion of, 'What is the most basic definition of shelter?'" Buster said.

Then again, the installation could be one enormous structure, a membrane

made up of many "living cells." Buster works with ideas of skin and skeleton. Her installations often involve carefully engineered fabrications that manipulate space in the gallery. She has also shown at the Kemper Museum in Kansas City, Mo., and both the Hirshhorn and the Kreeger museums in Washington, D.C.

Her work usually requires painstaking assembly, and her husband, artist Siemon Allen, travels with her to help install it. The social message given off by the repeated shapes occurred to Buster after she finished the piece. Though the work initially offers a placid view, giving the effect of a blue sky, the rigid uniformity of "Model City" has a sinister feel.

"There's something a little strange about all that uniformity — whether in shelter or in clothing," Buster said.

One could even put a question mark after the title, "Model City?" It is partly a model because of scale and partly a question of whether uniformity is an apt model for society.

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PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Against the backdrop: Viewers are struck by the tent city that is built perfectly to scale, but at the same time feel uneasy about its blatant uniformity. Is uniformity the model for society?

Details

WHAT: "Model City" by Kendall Buster

WHEN: Through Dec. 17

WHERE: Anderson Gallery, Drake University, 25th Street and Carpenter Avenue, Des Moines

HOURS: Noon-4 p.m., Tuesdays-Sundays

