

Time for reflection: Artist Sharon Louden's installation fills Philbrook rotunda

James D. Watts Jr. Mar 3, 2019 0



Philbrook preparators George Brooks and Elizabeth Kennedy install elements of Sharon Louden's installation in the museum's rotunda. JOHN CLANTON/Tulsa World
John Clanton



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Sharon Louden is hoping for a great many sunny days between now and Nov. 3.

When she and the preparatory team at the Philbrook Museum of Art were in the process of installing the aluminum sheets that make up the site-specific installation Louden has created for the Philbrook rotunda, the sunlight streaming through the top of the dome hit some of the panels just right, to create an arc of light across the space.

“I had put that piece up to serve as a kind of anchor for the whole work,” Louden said, as workers continued to install what will

ultimately total 75 individual aluminum sheets, curved and twisted into specific shape, some 40 feet above the rotunda floor.

“I had no idea putting that piece of aluminum in that place would create that effect,” she said. “It was just that, for some reason, that point of the space felt to be the perfect place for it. And then the sun hit it and light started to be reflected all over the place — it was one of the magical things you can’t plan for.”

Louden’s piece, which at the time of this interview was as yet untitled, officially opened to the public Friday. It is the latest in a series of installations that Loudon has created over the past 15 years.

Throughout her career as an artist, educator and advocate, Loudon has worked in a wide range of media, from painting and printmaking to animation and sculpture.

“I’ve always loved the idea of materials having different meanings,” she said. “I love hardware stores, and I was going through a Home Depot when I came across this reflective sheeting that was used as a roofing material. I bought some and started messing with it, using it as if I were drawing a line with it.”

The material that she is using in her Philbrook installation she has to import from Canada — a process, she said, that the current U.S. tariffs on aluminum imports has been made much more complicated and expensive.

“I got more curious about what I could do with this material, and I found this guy in Toronto who made this stuff,” Loudon said. “And it was the perfect material for what I call ‘drawing in space.’”

The installation itself is complicated in part because of the sheer height of the Philbrook dome.

“I think the highest I’ve gone in a space before this is about 33 feet,” Louden said. “This has to be at least 40 feet. That makes everything more challenging. Fortunately, the people I’m getting to work with here are great. They’re all artists in their own right, and it didn’t take us long to find the groove we need to work together. It’s a very collaborative experience.

“I know this piece kind of looks as if it were just sort of thrown up into the air and stayed there,” she said, laughing, “but these guys are doing a lot of very hard work to get all those pieces up there. It’s very much a team effort.”

For the preparatory team, installing Louden’s piece has been one of the more challenging tasks they’ve had to deal with.

“Just communicating can be tricky,” said George Brooks, the museum’s chief preparator. He gestured toward the ceiling. “This thing is like a parabolic speaker. Sharon can be in one spot on the floor and we’re up 40 feet, and she doesn’t have to raise her voice for us to hear her. She moves to another point, and all we hear is every other voice and noise going on.”

“Also, I don’t think the architects ever envisioned this space being used in this way,” said preparator Elizabeth Kennedy.

“We’re dealing with a large number of objects that have to be individually placed according to what Sharon wants,” Brooks said.

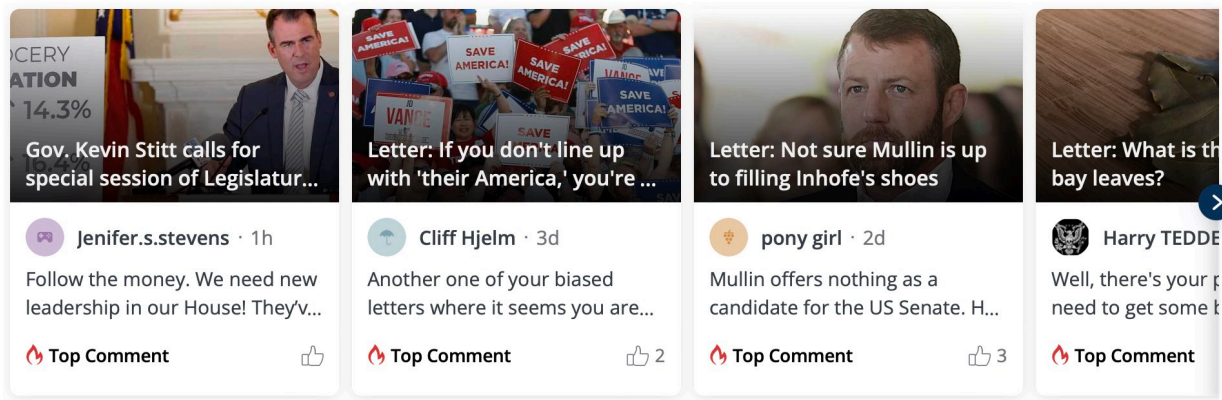
“Yeah, there’s a whole lot of fishing line up there,” added Calvin Frank, laughing.

“Is this the hardest installation we’ve done? Heck, yeah,” Kennedy said. “But I’m really looking forward to when it’s finished and getting to see how one little spark of light might light up this whole place.”

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