

Artist's installation magnifies a vision

Discovering What's Next group helps with life changes



Artist Janet Shapero installing her artwork, called 'Reconfigurations,' at Discovering What's Next. (Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff)

By [Cindy Cantrell](#)
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Ronnie Friedland visited the Waltham Mills Open Studios in 2009 to see a friend's exhibit, and discovered the work of Janet Shapero. The artist's colorful, ephemeral work now graces the walls of Discovering What's Next, the Newtonville organization where Friedland helps people age 50 and older move on through retirement and beyond.

Friedland, a peer counselor from Sudbury, said Shapero's artwork is well-suited to inspiring people to look within themselves to figure out the next phase of their lives. And Shapero thinks that the organization's new location at the Newton Cultural Center has allowed her to create new work with a deep connection to the organization's mission.

The installation — titled "Reconfigurations" — will change over time.

"I want [the installation] to be thought-provoking, but also empowering so people consider the positive aspects of change," Shapero said earlier this month. "Especially if they're going through a change they didn't wish for."

Shapero started working in December on her installation, which is in a room that was once a classroom in the former Carr Elementary School. She began applying thin layers of acrylic paint onto transparent screens through the "rete-chrome" process she developed. Light shines through in varying degrees, similar to the appearance of stained glass.

For the first phase, she fitted numerous rete-chrome panels over the clear glass panes of the room's four large windows to alter the color and amount of light entering the room. In the second phase, Shapero suspended wave-like rete-chromes from the high ceiling to provide a sense of movement.

Viewers are invited to become participants by writing down their aspirations and sealing them in rete-chrome strips. Shapero will attach them to ball-shaped rete-chrome forms to complete the installation.

Shapero said that her act of transforming an ordinary classroom into an “exuberant, aesthetic experience” is designed to reflect and enhance the series of steps in which people explore the next phases of their lives at Discovering What’s Next. She said her installation has evolved, becoming more dimensional and independent, and finally a purposeful reconfiguration.

“I could have put up a half-dozen rete-chromes on panels and called it quits, but it was more exciting to create something to represent the next step in life,” said Shapero, noting that as a member of the agency’s age demographic, she can relate to the jumble of emotions associated with a new life phase. She also feels an affinity for the agency’s home, having attended public schools in Newton.

“I don’t want to interfere with how the room is used, but rather enhance people’s experience in it,” she said.

Shapero grew up in Newton but then lived in Italy, Wisconsin, and Utah before returning home about 10 years ago. Her teaching posts have included Wellesley College, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Maine College of Art, and Utah State University, where she was the tenured head of sculpture until she took an early retirement. She is currently a visiting professor in the Doctorate Visual Arts Program at the University of Barcelona in Spain.

Christine Osborne of West Newton, a peer counselor at Discovering What’s Next, accompanied Shapero the first time she visited the organization and can still picture the artist envisioning what she was going to do with the classroom. Today, it is used as a resource and information center for individuals and groups.

“From the glow Janet was exuding,” she recalled, “I could tell it was going to be amazing.”

According to Osborne, the installation is particularly appropriate for the organization’s Discover Encore program, which helps participants identify and pursue meaningful, paid employment in work that has social purpose.

The organization’s other tracks are helping participants incorporate community service and balance into their lives, along with realities such as health insurance and estate planning.

Devra Simon, who became executive director of the organization in January 2010, said the installation “far surpasses anything we could have imagined.”

“Everyone is amazed how the colors transform what is essentially a big space with basic white walls,” she added. “It’s beautiful to look at, but I also hope it keeps people energized.

The possibilities in the artwork should resonate with the potential within them to reconfigure their expertise and skills into something new and exciting.”

Community members who would like their aspirations incorporated into the exhibit are invited to mail or leave them in the Discovering What’s Next lobby mailbox in the Newton Cultural Center, 225 Nevada St., #104. Reconfigurations can generally be viewed Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings; every third Thursday morning; and every first, second, and fourth Thursday, 12-3 p.m.

To confirm access to the space, call 617-467-5438 or e-mail info@discoveringwhatsnext.com. For more information about the organization, visit discoveringwhatsnext.org. ■