

Picking up the pieces

Artist takes over after friend's death.

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Nick King photo

Artist Mark Mueller talks about a sculpture for the YouZeum he is finishing for friend Tammy Atkins, who died before completing the work. The work features a young girl and a doctor and will be installed by the time the interactive health museum opens in the fall.

When Mark Mueller was asked to complete a sculpture that fellow artist Tammy Atkins had started, he accepted without question.

It didn't matter that Atkins' style was different from Mueller's - her work was figurative, his is impressionistic - or that his friend had left no notes or sketches of the sculpture before she died last year at age 44.

One thing was certain: Atkins would have done the same for him.

"Tammy was very giving and very open with her ideas and with her art," Mueller said. "She was always willing to give a hand when it was needed. That's what connected us."

Atkins had started the bronze sculpture of an elderly doctor and a young girl for the YouZeum, an interactive health museum scheduled to open this fall in the former Federal Building at 608 Cherry St.

The life-size sculpture will be installed on a concrete bench at the west entrance to the museum. There, children and adults will be invited to touch the artwork and sit down beside the doctor.

"It will be an interactive piece, like Beetle Bailey," a bronze sculpture in front of the Reynolds Alumni Center at the University of Missouri-Columbia, said Wendy Knorr, who does public relations for the YouZeum.

Atkins had finished only wax busts of the two subjects when she died on Aug. 31 of pulmonary embolism. Her stepfather, retired doctor Ira Hubbell of Columbia, was the subject for the doctor, and Knorr's 9-year-old daughter, Kelsey, was the model for the young girl.

Ira and Gail Hubbell, who were among the original donors for the YouZeum, wanted someone to finish the piece in memory of their daughter. They turned to Jim Calvin, associate professor of art at MU, for help. Calvin had worked with Atkins and Mueller and was aware of their friendship.

He offered the project to Mueller. "I felt very honored to be asked," Mueller said. "Tammy would have said 'yes' if it had been the same scenario."

Gail Hubbell has been thrilled with Mueller's work on the project. "I think it has been a good partnership," she said.

Mueller was faced with the daunting task of creating bodies that would fit the busts. Instead of carving the bodies from clay as Atkins might have done, Mueller built frames and dressed them with real clothes. Even the stethoscope around the doctor's neck is authentic. The hands were cast directly from the subjects.

"This has gone well beyond anything I've done in the past," said Mueller, who was a graduate student in art at MU when Atkins was an undergraduate. "It's much bigger in scale, subject and technique than anything I've done before."

Now that the sculpture is basically finished, Mueller has painted it brown to expose any flaws. From there, he will apply a rubbery paint, creating a replica of the piece. Another layer of a harder material will be applied to secure the rubber mold. When that hardens, it will be removed and used as the mold for liquid bronze. "It's a five or six-step process," said Mueller, who began work on the sculpture in January.

If all goes as planned, the piece will be shipped later this month to a bronze foundry in Kansas City. The completed sculpture will be installed in August, just in time for the YouZeum's opening.

Mueller said completing the piece has been a true collaboration with Atkins. "I can see her work, and I can see mine," he said. "Sometimes, I feel her spirit leaning over my shoulder and saying, 'I think you should do it this way or that way,' " he said. "We have been in this thing together."

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