

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

St. Petersburg, Florida

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Images Available Upon Request
See new admission fees beginning October 10.

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LESLEY DILL'S POETIC, THEATRICAL WORKS TRANSFORM THE MFA

I Heard A Voice: The Art of Lesley Dill, on view from October 10-December 27, is one of the most compelling and spectacular exhibitions ever presented at the Museum of Fine Arts. This gifted artist has stated that “language is the touchstone, the pivot point of all my work.” But her art defies description in words, even as it inspires wonder. It must be seen, or more accurately, experienced.

This exhibition features 34 works, some of which have been created expressly for this tour. Many are large-scale; some cover an entire wall. Her new installations are a highlight. A profound spirituality is at the core of all her work. The exhibition was organized by the Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee, in conjunction with George Adams Gallery, New York. The *St. Petersburg Times* is the media sponsor of all MFA exhibitions.

Dill's art took flight when her mother gave her a complete collection of Emily Dickinson's poetry on her 40th birthday. Language had always been important to her. Her mother was a speech teacher, and she learned to respond to the “mysterious communication” of her father, a schizophrenic. She also holds a B.A. in English.

Dickinson's poetry continues to have a major impact on her life and work. Dickinson explored the big issues—mortality, the existence and wonder of the Divine, doubt, suffering, the natural world and its spiritual dimension. Dill recounts in the catalogue that “Dickinson's language released something in my unconscious mind. My response was not tied to her content, but to the immediate sense of feeling ‘lined up’ with the experience of her words.”

A mystical quality permeates many of Dickinson's poems. She also spoke as a woman, commenting on relationships, her domestic life, and her garden. Dill mostly uses line fragments, not complete poems in her work, and has also drawn on the writing of Salvador Espru, Franz Kafka, and others.

Delicate materials—paper, thread, and leaves—are another foundation. But in the finished work, they can be strong, even protective. In her catalogue essay, curator Nandini Makrandi Jestice, writes that “for Dill, paper is a metaphor for the human condition, seemingly fragile, yet malleable and strong” and “leaves are skin, leaves are

words, words are beings, words are sacred, beings are sacred.” Or think of Emily Dickinson’s lines: “The Leaves like Women interchange/Exclusive Confidence—”

Dill’s time in India, especially two years in New Delhi in the early 1990s, was another turning point. She was drawn to the variety of paper in India and began to use tea to color it. Some of her designs resemble the henna that is used to decorate the skin of a bride. She loved the look of the Hindi script, which was unintelligible to her, but which she “started to hear as an incantation.” The “sacred string” of India appeared in her pieces. But again, it was the overall culture and its *threads* of spirituality that found their way into her life and art.

So many of these elements come together in *White Threaded Poem Girl* (1996). The figure is covered with words, letters, symbols, and a striking design. She appears to be levitating. The paper is stained with tea, giving the work both an earthy and otherworldly cast. Abundant string hangs from the woman and even seems to emerge from individual letters.

In the monumental *Rush* (2006), a female Buddha-life figure is at the center, but looks rather small compared to the enormous banners that seem to emanate from this calm center. They carry lines of wisdom or poetry, messages from within and maybe from beyond.

The color red dominates this installation. Ms. Jestice points out that “red is a color of celebration in India, used primarily in weddings, and *Rise* is truly a joyous celebration, a breathtaking culmination of Dill’s engagement with form, text and vision.”

Many of Dill’s works convey a visionary experience, one that often incorporates, but is ultimately beyond, words. *Breathing Leaves* (2004) and even more, *Rush* (2006-2007) picture small figures with overwhelming visions, inspiration, dreams flowing from them. Perhaps they convey an “out of body” experience. Both are large-scale, with *Rush* measuring 20 x 60 feet x 6 inches.

Just as her artistic vision is expansive, so is Dill’s choice of media, which encompass photography, prints, sculpture, installations, and performance art. She even created an opera, *Divide Light* (2008), which features incredible images and installations and writing by both the artist and Dickinson. In her catalogue essay, critic Thyrza Nichols Goodeve calls it “a grand operatic display of interiority itself.”

Dill’s work is in such major collections as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art, the Toledo Museum of Art, and the New Orleans Museum of Art. The MFA, St. Petersburg is fortunate to have her *Twist of the Funnel* (1998) in the collection. This mixed-media work was completed at Graphicstudio, the University of South Florida, Tampa. The acquisition was made possible with funds provided by the late Hanna Koch, a longtime Museum benefactor and former trustee.

The illuminating catalogue features beautiful multipage reproductions, two essays, and extensive biographical material on the artist. The scale and originality of the work shine through on these pages. This handsome book is available in the Museum Store for \$39.95.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Sunday, October 11, 6:30 p.m.: The Wayne and Frances Knight Parrish Lecture, co-sponsored by the Collectors Circle.

Ms. Dill, who calls herself a “word collector,” will focus on “We Are Animals of Language.” She is an outstanding lecturer. In addition to an M.F.A. from the Maryland Institute of Art, Ms. Dill holds an M.A.T. from Smith College.

Each year the Parrish Lecture brings an outstanding speaker to the Museum. The Parrishes, who lived most of their lives in Washington, D.C., donated many of the Museum’s most significant pre-Columbian objects. They are displayed in the Parrish Gallery. Mr. Parrish was a successful publisher of aviation magazines, and Mrs. Parrish was a noted public servant. She was director of the U.S. Passport Office from 1955-1977.

The Collectors Circle is a Museum support organization dedicated to enhancing the collection. All proceeds from its events and programs are used for Museum art acquisitions. The group also increases understanding of art and collecting through a lecture series and study trips to art fairs, museums, galleries, and private collections in both the United States and Europe. Mary Alice McClendon is the President of the Collectors Circle.

Tour and Lunch with the Director, Friday, October 30 and November 20, 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.: See the exhibition with an ideal guide. Join MFA Director Dr. John Schloder for a private gallery talk, followed by a gourmet lunch prepared by the MFA Café. Participation is limited, first-come, first-served. Cost is \$35 per person. For reservations, please contact Ellen Rivera at 727-896-2667, ext. 221, or via e-mail, erivera@fine-arts.org.

Lesley Dill Family Day, Saturday, November 21, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.: Create paper dresses and poetry bracelets and enjoy scavenger hunts and performances. **One Free Child Admission with each paid adult.**

Interactive Gallery: A magnetic poetry wall, a stanza station, and a DVD focusing on Dill’s work will encourage children and the young-at-heart to become more involved in the exhibition. Museum Masterpiece Treasure Sheets will lead students and adults to the permanent collection.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

The MFA has the only comprehensive art collection, extending from antiquity to the present day, on the Florida west coast. The collection of more than 4,600 objects includes important works by Monet, Gauguin, Renoir, Morisot, Cézanne, Rodin, Bourdelle, Hassam, Henri, Bellows, O’Keeffe, and Andrew Wyeth. The MFA has been repeatedly named the area’s best museum by *Tampa Bay Magazine*, *Creative Loafing*, and *Tampa Bay metro*.

Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and 1-5 p.m. Sunday. **Beginning October 10, admission to all special exhibitions and the Museum's stellar collection is \$14 for adults, \$12 for those 65 and older, and \$8 for students seven and older with current I.D. Children under seven and Museum members are admitted free. Groups of 10 or more adults pay only \$10 per person and children \$6 each with prior reservations. No reciprocal museum memberships can be offered for the Lesley Dill exhibition.**

The MFA Café is open from 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and serves special brunches on the second Sunday of the month. For café reservations, please call 727-822-1032. The Museum Store has been named the best in the area by the *duPont Registry*. For more information on the MFA, call 727-896-2667 or check out the web site at www.fine-arts.org.