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Putting the bling back in 'Big Bling'



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY NEATHAWK DESIGNS

Lindsay Neathawk, of Neathawk Designs, restores the gold leaf on "Big Bling."

Neathawk Designs' creativity expands beyond carved signs

By BENJAMIN CASSIDY >> *The Berkshire Eagle*

Some art pieces demand more than just their creators' hands. That is certainly the case with "Big Bling," Martin Puryear's 40-foot-tall outdoor sculpture currently towering over North Adams' Marshall Street from a patch of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art's campus.

"I don't have the facilities to make a 30 or 40 or 50-foot high work in my studio, nor do I have the technical facilities to work certain materials," Puryear once said in an interview with Art21. "So, it's putting yourself in the hands of other people and trusting their skill and their willingness to do what you want."

By now, Mass MoCA staffers are well-versed in constructing and assembling such works; massive, complex installations regularly fill the museum. But for "Big Bling," which previously was on display in New York City's Madison Square Park and along

Philadelphia's Schuylkill River Trail, outside help was going to be necessary. After being exposed to many hands during its two previous stops, the shiny shackle that hangs from the sculpture's tiered wooden and linked body needed to be gold-leafed again. Basically, "Big Bling" was missing its bling.

That's why the museum contacted Lindsay Neathawk of Neathawk Designs. If you live in Berkshire County, you've probably seen the Williamstown custom wood and metal computer numerical control (CNC) shop's work. Neathawk and her husband,

Ryan, have made signs for TurnPark Art Space, Mount Greylock Regional High School, Canna Provisions and Trail House Kitchen and Bar, among countless other clients. Some of their signs require gold-leafing, or taking sheets of gold and laying them on a surface. It's not as easy as it sounds; the material is extraordinarily light and, thus, tedious to apply.

"The physical form of breath," Neathawk said of how one worker described it at Mass MoCA.

Neathawk had just grabbed some gold leaf at the couple's shop along North Hoosac Road on Monday. Her husband sat next to her. Initially, the Neathawks didn't know which installation they would be working on. Once they did, they only had a few days to give the shackle a new shine. It was in rough shape.

"With gold, you don't ever want to touch it with your hands because of all of your oils — it tarnishes it. It leaves fingerprints, and because it's so thin, it makes it wear," Neathawk said.

They acquired the gold online. "This isn't just simple 23 or 24-karat gold. This was a special gold that has a reddish tint in it, and I couldn't find it anywhere," Neathawk said.

She wanted to respect the artist's original choice, though, and persisted until she found it. Because it was a work of art, the couple felt some extra pressure on the job, but Ryan said that the sculpture's history helped alleviate some of that anxiety. Puryear had let Unalam in Unadilla, N.Y., handle much of the piece's original construction.

"He had to rely on other people," Ryan said.

It also wasn't Neathawk Designs' first museum job. In 2012, the company was commissioned to CNC-carve a replica of a ceramic Nuzi lion from ancient Mesopotamia for the Harvard Semitic Museum.

"This guy," Ryan said, placing the replica on the table.

A neighbor connected them to that job as well as Lindsay's "Arch of Titus" replica that was displayed in the "The Arch of Titus — from Jerusalem to Rome, and Back" exhibit at the Yeshiva University Museum from 2017 to 2018. Collaborating with the the Institute for the Visualization of History,



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Neathawk Design was contracted by the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art to restore the gold leaf on the shackle of "Big Bling," which sits at Main and Marshall streets in North Adams.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY NEATHAWK DESIGNS

Ryan Neathawk repairs the shackle of "Big Bling."

among others, Lindsay converted a digital depiction of the "Spoils of Jerusalem" relief panel on the famous Roman arch's interior into code that her CNC machine could then use to begin carving, according to a 2017 article in *The Times of Israel*. The image shows Roman soldiers triumphantly carrying sacred objects from the sacked Jerusalem Temple into Rome during the First Jewish-Roman War. At 12 1/2 feet wide, 6 1/2 feet tall and 1 1/2 feet deep, the 1,000-pound foam work was a much larger undertaking than a typical sign.

"This project was in a totally different league, both in terms of size and intricacy," Lindsay told Renee Ghert-Zand of *The Times of Israel*.

But Lindsay had a background in both art and art history. The Lanesborough native studied them at Bridgewater State University and Charles University in Prague. After graduating from BSU as a graphic design major, she worked for a toy company in designing and packaging. She married Ryan, whom she had met when they were in ninth grade at Mount Greylock Regional High School but didn't start dating until she was 22, in 2008. Their first child, Ava, arrived in 2010, the same year Lindsay was laid off. She knew she wanted to do something artistic, but there weren't many graphic design positions around. Ryan suggested that she buy a 2-by-2 CNC and start making children's bedroom signs while she was home with Ava.

"He's a tool fanatic," Lindsay said of her husband.

Ryan had majored in finance at the University of Vermont and received an MBA from the University of Massachusetts - Amherst, but he has been doing construction work his whole life. When he was laid off from an accounting job in 2008, he started Neathawk General Contracting, a business

that he recently shut down in order to assist his wife with Neathawk Designs full-time. He had been helping her all along with constructing signs, though. Gradually, the business grew out of the family's Williamstown home and into the North Hoosac Road space the company has been expanding since 2014.

"This was in our one-car garage!" Lindsay said on Monday of the 4-foot by 8-foot CNC in one of the business' work rooms.

She had used her 401(k) savings to buy the CNC in 2011. Generally speaking, a CNC uses code to inform its automated actions. That code stems from computer-aided design (CAD) software. The Neathawks have multiple machines in their work space, including a plasma CNC that Ryan built himself. In one day, the couple can finalize a computer design, make cuts on the plasma machine, weld, sandblast and powder coat.

On Monday, a wooden piece with a message was resting on the oldest CNC. A nearly finished sign for Mary M. Walsh Elementary School in Springfield was nearby; its stakes are pencils.

"I like to take things and go up a notch," Lindsay said.

Steel lettering for a Williamstown Police Department sign was also sitting out. The Neathawks' client list runs the gamut of professional and residential life, so their work is ubiquitous.

"Our kids are like, 'Oh, Mommy's sign is there!'" Lindsay said, referring to 9-year-old Ava and 7-year-old Carter.

Lindsay considers each sign to be "an art piece." She knows how important they are to her customers.

"I treat every sign like it's the cover to their book," she said, "and everyone judges a book by its cover."



Ryan and Lindsay Neathawk stand in front of Lindsay's "Spoils of Jerusalem" relief replica that was on display as part of the "The Arch of Titus — from Jerusalem to Rome, and Back" exhibit at the Yeshiva University Museum.