Exhibit reveals Holocaust survivor's art

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WILLIMANTIC — At the early age of 3, artist Rosemarie Koczy, who passed away in 2007, was taught that hard work would set her free. She learned this as a witness of the Holocaust.

Eastern Connecticut State University’s Akus Gallery is currently holding its second exhibit of the fall semester titled, “Rosemarie Koczy (1939-2007): Process and Realization” that exhibits Koczy’s artwork and her creative process.

The exhibit will run through Thursday and the gallery talk and opening reception, curated by Marion Callis, was held in November.

During the gallery talk, Callis briefly went over Koczy’s life. How she was separated from her parents, forced into a slave labor camp, liberated and then finding solace in art.

Callis said the German words “arbeits macht frei,” (“work will set you free,”) were engraved in the gate of concentration camps during the Holocaust, where Koczy had been taken from her parents and forced to witness atrocities every day.

Then, a befriended a man named Stauco, who would often times give her his food to give her a fighting chance to live.

Later in life, Koczy would draw figures of this man who risked his life for her, jotting down her repressed memories from these camps at the same time.

Koczy eventually received a formal education in art and graduated cum laude from the École des Arts Décoratifs in Geneva, Switzerland, and later, the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, France.

Callis said Koczy began her career as a tapestry artist because of her life experiences after her liberation from the slave labor camps.

Once she left the prison camps, she was placed in a series of orphanages. At that time, young girls were taught domestic work.

According to a press release, “she launched her career as an in-demand fiber artist, specializing in complex and often free-standing hybrid tapestry-sculptures, until her discovery by influential mentors, including the Venice, Italy-based tapestries artist, Joseph Kusugakshin; Jean Dubuffet, the artist-founder of the Collection of the Museum of the City of Paris; and Thomas Messer, director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York from 1961 to 1981.”

“Koczy’s figures, sometimes appearing distorted to show how those people were tortured by the Nazis, many of the figures in her drawings had their hands over their heads, or appear in a crucifixion-like pose.”

Callis said that Koczy was able to express not only the physicality of the figures but behavioral as well.

“She really had it in her to be able to express the behavior, the history of the figures, when you spend time with them they are much multi-layered characters,” Callis said.

“More are coming to you much like how you get to know a person. When you first meet someone you seem a certain way. The more you get to know them, the more they surprise you.”

What is most impressive, Callis said, is Koczy’s use of everyday materials to create extraordinary artwork.

“This is the most ordinary materials that she was using. These are pine planks from Home Depot that she was using,” Callis said as she pointed to Koczy’s artwork during the opening reception.

“The most ordinary materials making something extraordinary with them is, I thought, very helpful to art students to see and not feel limited to what they have access to.”

Students who attended the gallery talk said they appreciated the historical context behind Koczy’s work.

“It’s interesting walking in and not knowing anything and looking at it and saying, ‘this is very dark,’” said sophomore Alexis Plante.

“But then you listen to them speak about it and learn the history; you see that it’s actually something that’s very lovely, to honor people who lost their lives.”

First-year student Alexa Zapko said she appreciated the historical context Callis gave during the gallery talk.

“Because when I walked in, I didn’t know anything about it, I just saw a lot of portraits.”

Koczy’s widowed husband, Luis Peloni said, “Despite Rosemarie’s history, I’ve never known anyone who loved life as much as she did. She was so full of adoration of human beings.”