

EXPRESSIONS

Matters of the heart

BY JACQUELYN WALSH ('09)

When Sam Hunter had a heart attack in 2008 at age 46, her art and her inspiration turned in a new direction. An intermedia arts Master of Fine Arts student, Hunter claims fabric as her first love and has created pieces based on the forms of hospital gowns and hearts since her heart attack.

The M.F.A. in intermedia arts is a three-year program where students utilize an endless variety of materials and media to create their work. Hunter focuses on fabric, hand stitching, sculpture and unexpected items such as metronomes for her art. "These works are about trying to understand and assimilate the new identity that my health has insisted I create," she explains.

Last summer Hunter ('10M) studied with Mark Rooker, JMU art professor and director of the metals program. "Where other artists rely on obfuscation and abstraction to mask a lack of resolved conceptual development, Sam designs her work to communicate clearly, broadly and with depth," says Rooker.

Hunter earned a B.A. from California State University–Channel Islands, *summa cum laude*. She enjoys the diversity in her bicoastal education. Last year she was eligible for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts fellowship, and her application of eight slides and a resumé landed her one of the \$6,000 graduate-level prizes. "Contests like this are a function of the right juror seeing you in the right moment. It's a statistical crap shoot," says a modest Hunter.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts has awarded 1,940 fellowships worth \$4 million since 1940. In 2009, the museum awarded 33 fellowships to professionals and students to help pay for education or advance a career in the visual arts.



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"The VMFA is dedicated to making sure art doesn't dry up in Virginia," says Hunter. She is using her fellowship to cover supply expenses and to maintain materials. She also visited Europe last summer to see *La Biennale di Venezia* in Venice. The major contemporary art exhibition, which began in 1895, showcases international works and serves as inspiration to artists and patrons.

"This affirmation from the VMFA and financial support has given a significant boost to Hunter's production as restrictions on material costs were transcended," says Hunter's mentor Corinne Diop, coordinator of the School of Art and Art History graduate program.

Hunter goes to great lengths to challenge her audiences. One of her hospital gown-inspired pieces resembles leather armor and is decorated with 1,400 scalpel blades hand sewn onto the piece. She describes the project as taking "40 hours and 20 years," referring to her 20 years of sewing experience. Typically for Hunter, the "construction isn't nearly so long as the sit-and-thinks."

Rooker thinks his student has a promising future. "Sam's current work is a courageous and powerful exploration of her experiences as a cardiac patient. The exploration shows her great promise. She is developing a clear, powerful and poetic voice, and has a great deal to say."

"I've got a couple more hospital gowns in me," Hunter says. "I'm still walking, still talking, still accomplishing my dream."



Intermedia arts M.F.A. program student Sam Hunter ('10M) creates fabric art in the form of hospital gowns (far left). She draws inspiration from surviving a heart attack. She exhibited her mixed media works with the Arts Council of the Valley at Smith House last fall. Her final thesis exhibit will be April 14–21 in Duke Fine Arts Center's Sawhill Gallery with an opening reception on April 15 from 5 to 7 p.m.

