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## Professor's print exhibition brings biosphere to Illinois Wesleyan

Kellie Nock Updated Nov 18, 2016

With prints featuring Montreal's famous biosphere, Kent State Assistant Professor of art Taryn McMahon opened her solo exhibition show "Biosphere" at Illinois Wesleyan University on Nov. 7. The show featured prints from her series which she took inspiration from at the landmark in Montreal.

"When it was built for the World's Fair, it was this huge biosphere, geodesic dome structure — very futuristic, very forward-thinking for its time," McMahon said. "It was covered in plexiglass panels, and it was filled with plants and birds."

The biosphere was designed for the 1967 World's Fair by architect Buckminster Fuller, according to Environment and Climate Change Canada. In 1976, the biosphere's outer layer caught on fire, causing the outside to never be properly restored to its original acrylic skin.

"It was this utopian ideal like very common to the '50s and '60s," McMahon said. "Through architecture, through planning (and) design, we can perfect the world. And obviously that never really happened, and over time that structure itself after the Fair fell into disrepair ... So it has this very dystopian feel to it if you visit it now. It's still a beautiful structure.

McMahon said she was interested in the idea of "dreaming of things or planning for things that don't necessarily happen."

She cited her pondering of the relationship between humans and the natural world and human's efforts to control it.

"We can't always control things we think we can, or it doesn't always turn out the way that we think it will," McMahon said.

With help from senior fine arts major Justin Buescher, McMahon started making her prints last winter. But the actual planning began a couple of years ago, when McMahon first visited the structure in Montreal. Buescher helped to finish up and frame each piece.

"It's been really amazing to work with a student and help me get everything organized and ready," McMahon said.

McMahon first approached Buescher last year to help her with a project at the beginning of the summer, and then Biosphere later in the season. Buescher has had many classes with McMahon since his first year as a print major.

"Her first year at Kent (State) was my first year as a print major, so we have kind of grown together ... she has been one of my greatest mentors I have had in my life," Buescher said. "Looking back at working with (McMahon), I learned a lot about what it takes to be a professional artist (and) I got to pick her mind a lot during our work time."

Buescher helped McMahon print and prepare her pieces to be sent off to the Merwin Gallery at Illinois Wesleyan University. McMahon approached Gallery Director Ian Carey, and after reviewing her proposal, Carey and his colleagues decided to display her work.

"The Merwin Gallery's large footprint allowed her to experiment with a site specific installation that focused on various printmaking processes," Carey said. "I could not be happier with the result ... (McMahon) was a joy to work with. It's always a pleasure to meet and work with a talented and ambitious artist. I just had to sit back and allow her the space to work. Her efforts allowed for a fantastic result."

Using a variety of printmaking techniques spanning from digital work to a more traditional lithography, which McMahon called "historic technology." Before digital work was used for commercial printmaking, there was lithography.

The process involves drawing on lithographic limestone, etching the stone, rolling it up in ink and then printing on paper or mylar. Now that lithography is no longer used for commercial printmaking, artists use it to create a certain effect with their work and evoke certain feelings from each piece.

"I want them (the audience) to think about what the images are," McMahon said. "I want them to recognize that there's some kind of man-made and natural interaction here between the different forms and to question what that interaction. I want them to be able to appreciate the work formally, like I want to make images that people--that make people want to look longer."

McMahon wants people to question their relationship with nature and to be critical of all aspects of the future of ecology.

“I wouldn’t necessarily call it an activist’s intention, (but) I feel hopeful about the future ... about ecology, and about what we’ve done and what we’re doing,” McMahon said. “I think that there’s also room to be critical and think about these spaces and histories that we have, and if people can kind of get a glimmer of that, then I think that’s what I’m after.”

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