

Gary Gresl, Living in a Material World

By Pegi Christiansen, Art City contributor

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Typically, artists will do almost anything to keep making art. Take Chuck Close, the internationally recognized portrait painter who suffered a spinal blood clot at 49. As a quadriplegic, he developed a system to hold a paintbrush between his teeth to continue painting.

So there was more than one gasp when one of Milwaukee's finest artists, Gary John Gresl, stated that his solo show at Mount Mary College would likely be the last significant gallery show. It was not a cry for attention. Gresl is a humble man who has done much to bring recognition to other artists. He helped enlarge and improve the century-old organization now called Wisconsin Visual Artists and he collaborated with Tom Lidtke from the Museum of Wisconsin Art and others to inaugurate the Wisconsin Visual Art Lifetime Achievement Awards.

But Gresl was not bluffing about needing to quit the gallery scene. Money tells part of the story. Gresl rented a 24-foot truck and needed the help of three people to haul his delicate and large-scale assemblages to and from Mount Mary, where his show closed at the end of October. Gresl leases a large storage unit to store his art for \$240 a month. He once used specially built crates to store his art, but cost and lack of space forced him to stop. He works in an unheated two-car garage.

An accountant might advise Gresl to stop making such large sculptures, to consider installations and smaller work. But the point of Gresl's art is wild extravagance. If you add together the energy of George Harrison's "Living in the Material World," Police's "Spirits in the Material World" and, yes, even Madonna's "Material Girl," you start to get a sense of the uncompromising and exuberant there-ness of Gresl's art.

"The use of materials has united my life," says Gresl. He combines materials in analogous and metaphorical ways. His layering of resources parallels the layering of experiences. Gresl uses the word palimpsest, a parchment with text that can be erased and reused to describe his process. He creates a message, pulls it apart, rebuilds another, and the new piece holds the

history and multiple meanings of these reclamations of salvaged materials.

Someone discarded most of the materials that Gresl uses. The remains, found at antique shops, rummage sales or by the side of the road, Gresl thinks of as middens, or the refuse mice leave outside their holes.

Some might hear this self-effacing description and find it incompatible with the scale of Gresl's art and its meaning. Cedar closets loaded with objects manifest the memories in our brains. The sheer diversity of materials exhibits, as Gresl notes, "We are not all of one thing."

Synectics is a brainstorming tool that uses metaphorical language to solve problems. Gresl practices visual synectics. The taut fishing poles in his installations embody the tensions of life. Darts and arrows exemplify the stings of hurt, excitement and pain. The physical manipulation of elements within this frame resolves the conflict and evokes change and evolution.

The lyrics from Harrison, the Police and Madonna, each in their own way, contrast the material with the spiritual world. The songs pose different solutions to the trap of the material world. With Gresl's art the material becomes the spiritual. The trap disappears.

What should Gresl do now? He refers to John Wilde, who died with hundreds of pieces of art left behind. "The art becomes an encumbrance," says Gresl. Gresl only dabbled in art until 1982. Thirty years later, he is still enthralled with the process. Gresl created five new installation pieces for the Mount Mary show. While installing them he felt what he calls a "regenerative force."

Gresl has turned to photography as one way to try and have it all. He assembles, takes pictures and then dismantles. He can do this with a smaller stash of material goods.

Still, for Gresl to maintain his full art muscle, he may need a benefactor and a crew of sturdy young artists to lift, carry and move at his direction. What would it take to locate free storage space for him? What would it take to establish an ongoing intern relationship with a local art school? Milwaukee should find a way to empower Gresl.

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