

NEWS

A professional artist with a sense of social responsibility

Liz Chilsen tries to ask the right questions through her art



by Tom Holmes

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Liz Chilsen at the opening reception for the "No Place Like Home" exhibition curated by Dr. Natasha Ritsma at Aurora University's Schingoethe Center.

Liz Chilsen is a professional artist. In fact, the 23-year resident of Forest Park has impressive credentials.

She has a degree from the University of Wisconsin where she focused her undergraduate work on ceramics, and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree at Columbia College in Chicago where she focused on photography.



Performing a 'smoke firing' of her ceramic works in her Weber Smokey Joe "kiln".

Her portfolio includes work as a graphic preservation archivist with the Wisconsin Historical Society, serving as the executive director of an organization fostering the sister-state relationship with Nicaragua and the state of Wisconsin, completing a photography project for Landmarks Illinois, and currently serving as part-time executive director of the Riverside Arts Center since 2021.

Unlike most of the 52 artists showing at last year's Garage Galleries, the descriptor "professional" fits Chilsen because she earns her entire living from and with art. She estimates that about half of her annual income comes from the art she creates and sells.

For example, she just closed an exhibition of her photography, sculpture, drawings and video at the Adds Donna Gallery in Humboldt Park during which she was able to sell several pieces.

She also works with buyers doing commissions for corporate offices, has received grants and sells some of her work from her website. "There are a bunch of ways to make income as an artist," she explained.

And the other half of her income comes from promoting and supporting the work of other artists, as she does in her capacity as the executive director of the Riverside Arts Center.

“I’ve always worked in some kind of arts administration and have taught art at times,” she said. “It’s not making art, but it’s working with art and supporting other people. That has always been a part of what I’ve been interested in.”

When Chilsen says she creates art with a sense of social responsibility, she does not mean she intentionally promotes any particular social cause or political ideology. She aims at something deeper than that. She works to create art that bridges the fault lines between people, places, things, and moments in time that are different.



A diptych pair from Liz Chilsen's "View From My Family Home". On the left, "Kris' Barnyard, Evansville, WI. On the right, "Patti's Manhattan Bedroom", NY.

One of the ways social responsibility finds its way into her art is through diptychs. “A diptych,” she said, “is two images side by side. I bring together things that might be seen as oppositions and see what you can learn from them. Each of those panels has its own reality, its own presence but you put them together and you understand something new.

“I look at how much we bring our own understanding to things. I explore where the fault lines in understanding are and how we might be able to make bridges. How we can bring two things together is a line that runs through all of my work.”

For example, she took pictures of Carl Schurz High School on Chicago's North Side where she used to live, then photographed a high school in a small town in central Wisconsin where she grew up and put those images together side by side. She lets viewers figure out what they see in the juxtaposition.

Another example of social responsibility is a project she completed called "Views from My Family Home." She began by making photographs through the windows of her childhood home in rural Wisconsin. She then took pictures through the windows of several of her eight siblings, one of whom lives in Manhattan and another in Evansville, Wisconsin.

When she places the images together, pictures, as they say, speak a thousand words. "In my parents' generation," she pointed out, "two-thirds of the population lived on farms. In my generation less than 2% live in that setting. We went from being rural to being urban and suburban in just one generation."

Half of her siblings live in big cities and half live on farms or in small towns. Placing the images taken through the windows of their homes invites the viewer to ponder the meaning of the massive changes our society has gone, and is still going, through.

"I'm interested," she said, "in place, in how we know who we are by where we are situated."

Chilsen emphasized that she is not promoting an ideological perspective but rather how we see the world is affected by where we're situated in the world. By photographing difference," she said, "and putting the images side by side, I'm trying to get at a deeper social meaning than promoting a specific ideology.

"For me, my art is not a prescription. It's more about asking questions."