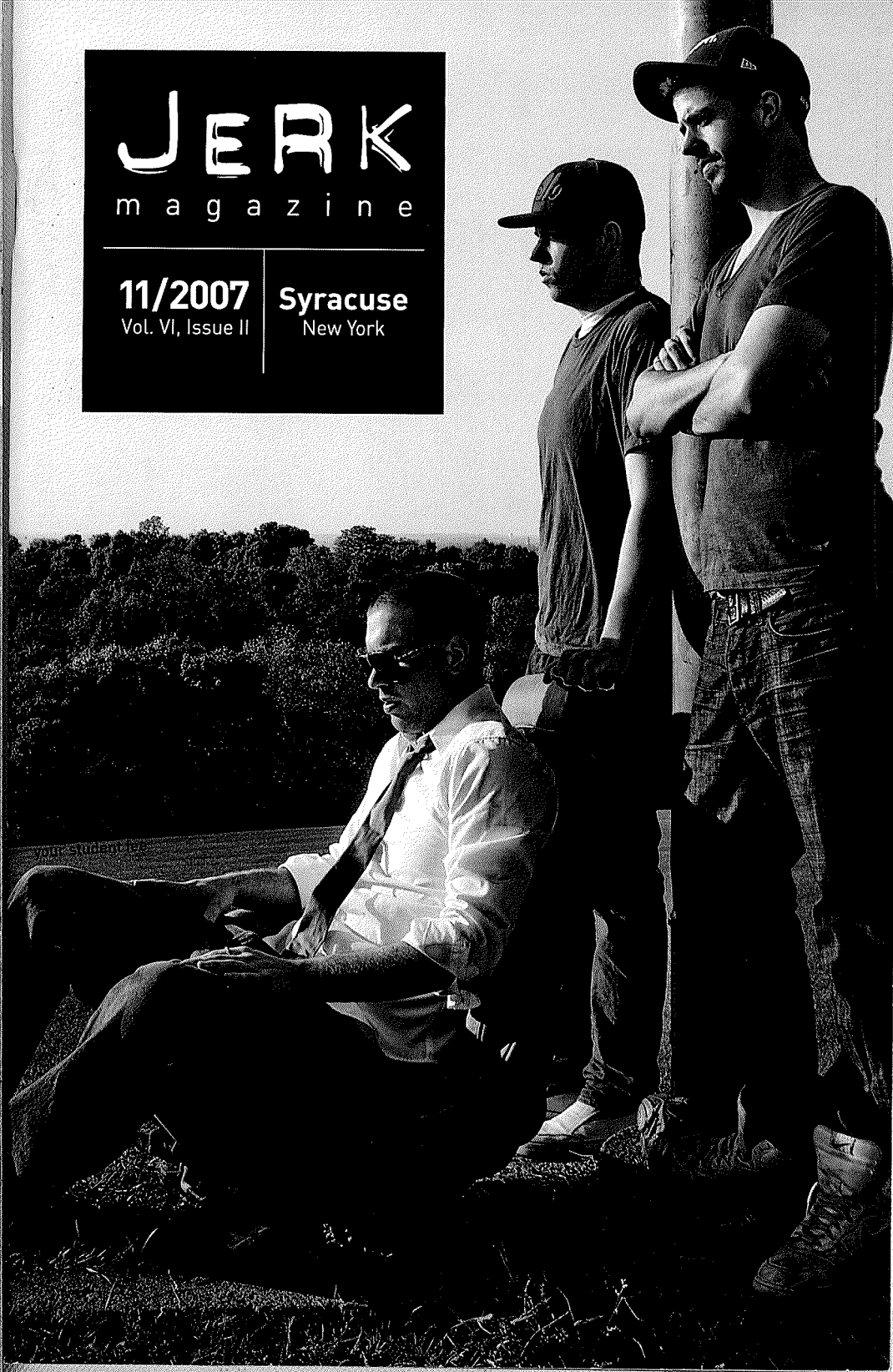


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# Blanket Statement

## SU grad student stitches together community art installation

By Jenna Hanchard + Illustration by Nicole Troillet

There's an abandoned gas station that sits on the corner of East Colvin Street and Nottingham Road in DeWitt, just outside Syracuse. The station is an eyesore, but the presence of the old pumps is reminiscent of big Buicks, reasonable prices, and friendly gas station attendants (unless you live in New Jersey, that is).

This now decrepit gas station is about to get a makeover by way of the International Fiber Collaborative — the brainchild of Jennifer Marsh, a third-year graduate student of fine arts at Syracuse University.

Marsh plans to sew together 800 three-foot square fiber panels crocheted by people from the Syracuse community and beyond. Once she crochets the panels together, Marsh will use them to cover the gas station — picture an entire building engulfed by a giant, colorful tea cozy.

Marsh said these panels will represent people's feelings about their respective countries' use of oil for energy, as well as connect art with a larger community. "I didn't want to be an artist cooped up in some studio," she said. "I wanted to create a dialogue."

And Marsh has certainly struck up a conversation. She has sent hundreds of e-mails to individuals and fiber and sculpture guild groups about her project. She has managed to take it beyond its Central New York roots and has traveled across the

country, setting up exhibitions about the International Fiber Collaborative at craft shows in California and New York City. She also has tentative plans to create a similar installation at a gas station in West Virginia and as far away as Australia.

Now the challenge for Marsh is collecting the panels for the project. With only three received so far, she is a far cry from reaching her projected goal of 800 panels. "It's a hard thing with art to connect with the general public," she said. "Sometimes I feel like I only get 10 percent of what I put out there."

That is not to say she hasn't sparked the interest of some potential patchworkers.

Carol Lovell, a 73-year-old Syracuse native, has already made one square and plans to donate more. "I had some yarn around so I said 'yeah, what the heck,'" Lovell said. The first panel took her about eight to 10 hours to make and she plans to make more during the holidays. "The first one I had was all one color. I just sent it to [Jennifer] in a hurry to encourage her," she said.

Karen Morano, a self-proclaimed homemaker and activist from Chittenango, N.Y., is also making squares and donating yarn for the project.

"Five or six of my friends called me after reading about it in [The Post-Standard] saying, 'I thought you'd be really interested in this!'" Morano said.

And all the way from Caracas, Venezuela, Elena Tariffi, a pro-

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professional fiber artist and fiber arts teacher, wrote in an e-mail: "I am planning to make a few blocks myself. I am also encouraging other fiber artists locally and my students to contribute."

Marsh said one of the biggest goals of the International Fiber Collaborative is for the participants to feel like they have put themselves into the project.

"The potential and importance of Jennifer's project is that it moves art beyond the gallery setting to become a public practice," said Samuel Van Aken, an associate professor in the sculpture department at SU and Marsh's graduate thesis advisor.

As much as Marsh seeks to bridge the spatial and ideological gaps between the artist and the public, she also hopes to make a political statement about the uses and abuses of oil for energy. Lovell thinks this project is a good start.

"Even though we're not physically changing the oil industry, we're making an attempt to do something rather than sitting around the table and talking about it," Lovell said.

With the United States currently consuming more oil than any other country, there is a lot to talk about. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, in 2006 the United States was the number one consumer and net importer of oil in the world.

Tariffi thinks Marsh's installation will help shed light on its interlaced political message. "Fiber art can access different visual, tactile, and emotional areas, not only for the artist but mainly for the spectator," Tariffi wrote. "I am absolutely sure that this installation will touch the crucial issue of oil dependency and oil damage in a very significant way."

Tariffi also expressed how individual participation will give voice to such an issue. "I think that it's essential that a fiber artist like myself...contribute to a project like this, with my voice turned into blocks of images of my personal view," she wrote.

But let's not get carried away; Marsh is not here to start a revolution.

In August, she told *The Post-Standard* that she has never done political art before. Her father, Dave Marsh, who has been helping her

with a lot of the technical work on the project, said, "[Politics] is a vehicle for the artwork. She's not going to be throwing stones at oil tanks or anything."

While making a large-scale political statement may be new for Marsh, she has plenty of background in bringing art to the



people. Last semester, Marsh created metal sculpture workshops for four Syracuse high school art classes. She also taught art at summer camp workshops for inner-city youth in Syracuse.

But Marsh does not limit herself to Central New York. This past year she traveled to India for five weeks and worked as a volunteer English and art teacher in the village of Dharmsala.

A native of Columbus, Ohio, Marsh is the youngest of three and has the wholehearted encouragement of her family behind



her. Her father said he is proud of her vision.

"She was just some college girl in Syracuse...Now she has people interested in all parts of the country," he said. "That's cool."

As a long-time general manager of a hardware store in Columbus, Dave has been able to help out with some of the basic technical and construction work. He has also visited Syracuse to evaluate the site for the project.

But not everyone is as supportive of Marsh's project as her dad — she has received some negative feedback. When she first proposed the idea for the International Fiber Collaborative to the Dewitt Planning Board, they found it humorous.

"People have sent e-mails saying I could be doing better things with my time," Marsh said. "[They said], 'how could you take blankets from the Salvation Army when needy people can use them?'"

But Marsh said that criticism keeps her going because she knows that ultimately she has a greater goal.

"Typically, graduate students, and for that matter practicing artists, don't have the ability to take on such a large project," Van Aken said. "The fact that Jennifer not only has taken this on but has gained so much interest speaks to the determination she has toward this."

On her Web site, [www.internationalfibercollaborative.com](http://www.internationalfibercollaborative.com), Marsh has made an open invitation for any and all artists to participate. She hopes to receive all panels by March 15 of next year in order to start the installation on April 12.

When the project is complete, the nostalgia of the old gas station combined with the presence of the fiber panels will mesh art and politics in a new way for both Marsh and Central New York. The movement toward everything green and keeping the nation focused on the environment is an omnipresent task, but this installation may push beyond those boundaries with an artistic political statement created to provoke a dialogue.

"Installations [like the International Fiber Collaborative] are effective because they become participatory for the viewer — it is impossible to move in, around, or through an installation as a passive observer," said Van Aken. "Simply through the act of viewing, the viewer becomes part of the piece."

The panels have yet to be installed and Marsh has already sparked a local conversation about the world's oil dependency with national and international participants. With any luck, people will keep right on talking. **JM**