

Art gallery at HCC opens 2 exhibits by Chicopee artist

HOLYOKE — The pieces in artist Maryanne Bennis' new show at Holyoke Community College, "Accessories Not Included," look like small versions of the female figureheads that might once have graced the prows of ancient Greek ships.

"These gals are part superhero, part mythological, and all woman," said Bennis. "They are the action figures I wish I had had when I was a girl in the '60s, and the ones I want now."

The pieces in Bennis' other new show at HCC, "Curiosities From the Anthropocene and Yonder," incorporate found objects with molded ceramics and reflect the impact of humanity on the planet.

"I lost my parents, and I lost the home that I grew up in, and so it's sort of the same feeling," she said — "losing that security of home, but on a bigger scale."

Together, Bennis' two shows at HCC's Taber Art Gallery form one, "Double Your Pleasure," which opened Sept.

26 and runs through Thursday, Nov. 10. The gallery will host a reception from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 6, with an informal gallery talk by Bennis at 5:30 p.m.

Taber director Amy Johnquest says putting the two distinct shows in the gallery at the same time adds up to something greater than the sum of their parts.

"Each piece has its own sensibility and curiosity about it," said Johnquest, "and a viewer could come up with a narrative about what they're looking at that's different than Maryanne's. Each piece stands alone but also works well beside the others. I feel like the two shows talk to each other."

Bennis, who lives in Chicopee and maintains a studio at Paper City Studios on Race Street in Holyoke, is known primarily for her surrealist ceramic sculpture. She studied visual arts at HCC, which she entered as a nontraditional student in 1998 through



Chicopee artist Maryanne Bennis at the opening of "Double Your Pleasure," her two side-by-side shows now on display at HCC's Taber Art Gallery. (SUBMITTED / HCC)

the Women in Transition program, now called New Directions for Adult Learners. She graduated with her associate degree in 2002.

"I had my son when I was young and all of my teen years into my 20s were spent focused on paying the bills," Bennis said earlier this week as she finished

installing pieces for her shows. "When I came here, I was completely lost. But the instructors were really good. Very patient. Being roughly the same age as a lot of the instructors really made a difference, because it was like making friends. I felt safe. I felt protected. They answered all my questions no matter how silly

they were. It really means a lot to me to have a show here, because this is where I found my voice as an artist. It's kind of like coming home."

For the past seven years, Bennis has been teaching ceramics at senior centers throughout Western Massachusetts, as well as online, and in studios around the Pioneer Valley. Her work has been shown in galleries, museums and hardware stores east of the Mississippi.

The Taber Art Gallery, in the lobby of the HCC Library on the second floor of the HCC Donahue Building, is free and open to the public Mondays through Thursdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., during regular school sessions. The library is on the main HCC campus at 303 Homestead Ave., Holyoke.

For more information, contact Amy Johnquest at 413-552-2614. To see more of Bennis' work, visit Maryannebennis.com or Paper City Studios in person.