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New art in Austin Hall lends drama, honors history of College of Business

In the heart of Austin Hall a two story-high art installation gleams warmly, its tiled surface inviting visitors to look a little more closely at all the images interwoven within the piece. Called "The Currency of Insight," the piece uses photographs and archival images that have been glazed directly onto a series of more than 300 ceramic tiles in a unique process called digital glaze printing rarely seen outside of Europe.

Artist Amy Baur and her studio partner Brian Boldon of In Plain Sight Art use a digital version of the same printable glazing techniques first developed by Wedgwood china, but on a much grander scale. The result is a massively scaled installation that won't fade in the sun or scratch away, as the images are permanently part of the tile.

The Minneapolis-based artists have created a variety of ceramic and glass art installations in a variety of public and private spaces. Their work was one of two projects selected for Austin Hall through Oregon's "Percent for Art" program, facilitated by the Oregon Arts Commission. Austin Hall is the new home of the Oregon State University College of Business. The Percent for Art program requires that at least 1 percent of the direct construction funds of a new or remodeled state building with construction budget of \$100,000 or more be set aside for the acquisition of art for the building. The Austin Hall art selection committee included Jeewon Cho (College of Business) and Andy Myers and Julia Bradshaw (College of Liberal Arts).



A new art installation in Austin Hall depicts a collage of history and architecture. (Theresa Hogue)



A variety of images ebb and flow as viewers take in the two-story tile mural. (photo: Theresa Hogue)

Baur combed through documents and photographs in the OSU Special Collections & Archives Research Center and immersed herself in the history of the College of Business, which will be housed in the newly constructed Austin Hall. She created a collage of images that includes everything from old cash register buttons to historic photos of faculty members standing in front of Bexell Hall (the former home of the College of Business).

It was the idea of a student-oriented space that truly inspired Baur as she sought out images for the piece.

"They'll use this facility like a home base," Baur said, and that strong sense of place informed her work.

Not every image pops out immediately upon viewing, and Baur intended it that way. "Sometimes they're just layers, it's not really apparent at first," she said. "It's like wisdom." The meaning comes forth after spending some time with the work.

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From modern architectural lines to century-old botanical prints, the piece captures a variety of aspects not only of the College of Business, but Oregon State history as well. The muted tones of the piece echo other architectural features in the main hall in Austin, an intentional choice to keep the piece, while large, completely integrated into the space.

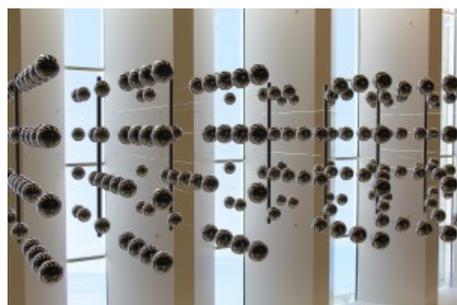
“This is a state-of-the-art building,” Baur said, “and we wanted to create a state-of-the-art piece.”

There are two main gathering spaces on the first floor of Austin Hall. The western-most space, called the digital commons, has a very different, equally dramatic art installation, this one suspended from the ceiling three floors above. Called “Abaci,” the installation is a collection of highly polish stainless steel spheres that reflect light through the hall’s skylights, shadow patterns and mirror the common area.

The inspiration of artist Ray King of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is the abacus, an ancient calculation tool. King’s original proposal was for a suspended glass wave, but working with the committee, he decided instead on the abacus piece, because by definition, business is based on the calculation of numbers and values.



Artist Amy Baur and tile contractor Phil Loza worked together on the new art installation in Austin Hall. (photo: Theresa Hogue)



Seen from below, a giant abacus glows in the reflected sunlight from skylights in Austin Hall. (photo: Theresa Hogue)

“The abacus is an ancient computer, and reminds us that business is a timeless pursuit,” he said.

The globes correspond to the beads on the abacus, and represent 24 milestones in the history of Oregon State University, from the founding of the university in 1858 to the opening of Austin Hall in 2014.

“In collaboration with the school administration we identified 24 significant dates in the history of OSU,” King said. “Each year has four vertical rows of seven spheres – along with a horizontal reckoning bar – associated with the date; the placement of the beads correspond to the position of the

beads on an abacus to indicate the number of the year.”

The spheres themselves reflect the changing environment of Austin Hall, including people passing through the space, which makes the piece feel very interactive.

“I like to say that my medium is “light” and I work with glass and metals to create optical sculptures,” he said. “The Abaci sculpture is both an abstract form and it has something for the viewer to discover that is very much connected to OSU. I also like the way the sunlight creates the specular sparks of light on the array of polished spheres.”

Ray is looking forward to how students and faculty interact with the new piece.

“I enjoy the challenges of this kind of art-in-architecture and especially in the university setting where the metaphors are understood, and they have a positive influence on the students and faculty as they interact with the artwork.”

~ Theresa Hogue



A student common area is enhanced by an art installation by Ray King that captures light and mimics an abacus. (photo: Theresa Hogue)

tags: "Austin Hall" abaci Amy Baur mural Percent for Art Ray King spheres tile

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