

Cosmopolitan artist braids viewers' hopes and dreams into her hair



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JESSICA EBELHAR/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Artist MK Guth sits in her interactive art installation "Best Wishes," in which she is both the artist and the subject in the P3 Studio at The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas. Guth asks gallery visitors to write wishes and desires on a strip of fabric, and Guth and her associates weave them into Guth's ever-growing braid. The braid is set to be cut Tuesday and displayed in the space.

Posted: Oct. 6, 2011 | 2:01 a.m.
Updated: Oct. 6, 2011 | 9:13 a.m.

Stevie Fellicelli and her best friend Tiffany O'Connell thought they were just killing some time when they stopped by The Cosmopolitan's P3 Studio on a recent Wednesday.

Instead, they wound up participating in the art installation they came to see: "Best Wishes," an interactive-performance art exhibit that incorporates people's hopes and wishes into artist MK Guth's synthetic hair.

Fellicelli, a tourist from Florida, came to Las Vegas to forget the difficulties in her life: she's getting divorced; her best friends both moved away and Fellicelli's been feeling more negative lately.

But she ended up chronicling them, along with her dreams and hopes, on a piece of cloth for Guth. Having them braided into the artist's hair probably won't help them come true but at least it made her feel better.

"I'm going through a lot in my life right now, it felt good to write some things down," says Fellicelli, who wished for a new direction in life and happiness.

Guth, a Portland, Ore., artist whose works often are tied to fairy tales and involve an interactive component, went on display Sept. 23. She is her canvas onto which assistants braid blond synthetic hair into her own fair locks. Six days into her exhibit, each of two braids measured about 40 feet. Guth brought 600 feet of hair with her but the response has been so strong, she worried that she might run out.

Guth formed the initial idea for this exhibit back in 2006 while working on another interactive project. When she was invited to be The Cosmopolitan's artist-in-residence, "the idea of working with P3 Studio in the middle of a casino led to questions about why people come here," Guth explains.

Whether tourists come to gamble, see shows, shop or something else, it typically involves a wish, or a dream or a hope, Guth says. And so she decided to ask people to share their wishes on white ribbons so she could braid them into her hair.

"This becomes a physical document of that," Guth says, gesturing to her braids that already weighed a couple of dozen pounds.

She expects the braids to weigh as much as 150 pounds in the final stages of the exhibit. People's hopes and wishes often are burdens that they keep to themselves. When those wishes are braided into her hair, it becomes a physical manifestation of the emotional weight.

"I carry those burdens around," she adds.

When Guth is not on display, she wears a specially-designed coat that supports the braids to keep them from pulling her hair out. In the studio, they hang from the ceiling and wall and trail along the floor and they grow by the hour. Visitors walk by and stare at Guth sitting on a clear plastic chair in the middle of an otherwise empty room. Two assistants braid the wish ribbons and additional hair into her braids. They wave at people and beckon to them. Some get a deer-in-headlights look and pass by.

"It's a little intimidating because you don't know what to expect," says O'Connell, who is a fan of art galleries but not of performance art.

People expect performance art to be weird, Fellicelli says.

"It was a little less strange than I thought it would be," she pauses. "It was strange, but they made you feel welcome."

Guth and her helpers explain the project and ask for participation. Wishes don't have to be earth-shattering, they say. Some people, waiting on their dinner reservations at nearby restaurants, wish for a good dinner. Others hope their loved ones recover from an illness or that they can send their kids to college.

"We've talked about art, we've talked about life, we've talked about death," Guth says of those who participated. "Some things people wish for are very casual, others are very profound."

Guth's "Best Wishes" is on display from 3 to 9 p.m. through Sunday and again Tuesday and Wednesday. At 4 p.m. Tuesday, Guth's hair will be cut and displayed in the space.

