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P. Buckley Moss cultivates creativity at the Moss Arts Center

By Mike Allen

BLACKSBURG - Art education matters a lot to Virginia artist P. Buckley Moss.



The Moss Arts Center at Virginia Tech has opened an exhibition of her landscape paintings, titled "Sowing Seeds." It's the first showcase of her art inside the \$100 million building that bears her name.

"Sowing Seeds" is paired with one of the center's "Young Artists" shows, called "Home," with drawings, sculptures and photography that explore the theme of landscapes, all created by fourth-, sixth- and seventh-graders from Giles County schools.

On a recent morning, Moss visited the young artists' show. "I think it's terrific," she said. "It shows you that they really appreciate the arts."

Moss, 83, has long been an advocate for grade school art education, programs that have frequently been reduced or eliminated by budget cuts. Growing up in New York City, Moss had dyslexia that made her appear to be a poor student, but a teacher's recognition of her artistic talent led to her enrollment in an art school, setting her on the path to becoming one of the most commercially successful artists in the nation.

At the Washington Irving High School for the Fine Arts in Manhattan, the young Moss got to see the best the art world had to offer. "When you live in a city, you can be introduced to all these

things," she said. Students in rural communities don't have those opportunities, which is why art education is so important there, she said.

The two shows have a curator in common. Meggin Hicklin, the center's exhibition program manager, ran April workshops for grades four through seven at Eastern, Mary McClagherty and Narrows elementary/middle schools that produced the art in the student show. She coordinated the workshops with Giles County teacher Amber Nelson, who teaches art classes in all three schools.

Hicklin also worked with center curator at-large Margo Crutchfield to select original watercolors by Moss for "Sowing Seeds." The show reaches beyond the peaceful, stylized scenes of the Mennonite community that are the most familiar elements of Moss' works, she said.

In the center's guide for "Sowing Seeds," Hicklin wrote, "Together, the two exhibitions suggest both what is needed in terms of education and the arts, especially in rural communities, and what is possible."

"Home" includes small square drawings arranged into quilts, made by fourth-graders; large landscape photographs made by seventh-graders, which are framed in windows with curtains decorated by sixth-graders; "spirit houses" built from sticks and moss by sixth-graders; and poetry and haiku written by seventh-graders.

"I really wanted to focus on letting the kids be creative," Hicklin said. The school system embraced the idea, allowing her to hold "art breaks" for students during regular school hours.

Hicklin said she designed the Giles school workshops "in the spirit of what Pat Moss is and does. I kind of did it in her honor." The program was made to include students who have no regular art curriculum, of "every kind of learning ability," she said.

The Virginia Tech center's commitment to tying educational elements to all its exhibits and programming led to Moss' decision to donate \$10 million to the building's construction in 2013, one of the largest donations in the university's history.

Moss saw it as a way to make sure her education advocacy continues. "I am 83, and I cannot do this forever," she said. "You want it to be carried on. You want people to be interested. You want them involved."

Started in 1995, the P. Buckley Moss Foundation for Children's Education offers grants for art teachers and programs and scholarships to artistic high school students with learning differences and college students pursuing special education careers. The P. Buckley Moss Society supervises donations of prints for charity fundraisers.

Virginia Tech named Moss a fellow of the university's Center for Organizational and Technological Advancement and its outreach programs in August 2013. In announcing the appointment, Tech cited her expertise as an advocate of incorporating the arts into education programs.

Moss has embraced her new position as a prominent Hokie with gusto. She speaks with great enthusiasm about Tech's new president, Timothy Sands, and about artistic and scientific projects under development at the university.

A P. Buckley Moss Gallery, run by her daughter Rebecca Ghezzi, opened in 2014 at 223 Gilbert St. in Blacksburg, a five-minute walk from the Moss Arts Center. A front wall prominently displays a new print by Moss of Smithfield Plantation, the historic museum adjacent to the Virginia Tech campus. A Christmas ornament design features Burruss Hall.

She paints in the wee hours in her house on Claytor Lake. Before she went to visit "Home" at the center, she had been painting from 1 to 5 a.m., she said. "I'm always doing new paintings."

Her gallery in Blacksburg has been hosting arts programming of its own. She proudly opened the piano in the front room to display the signatures on the frame of those who've played it, the most recent one being from Roanoke Symphony

Orchestra's David Stewart Wiley.

Those familiar with the pastoral Shenandoah Valley settings so common in her work might find her New York City accent and vivacious energy surprising. At the gallery, between sessions signing prints, she pointed out a print of three horses drawn in flowing curves, created from an etching. "The sexiest thing you can do is working on an etching plate," she said.

She believes everyone should be given the kind of chance she had to discover her artistic talent. She has a response to those who believe they have none. "Look at the way you put your makeup on, you do your hair, you do your clothes," she said. Those acts are guided by artistic sensibilities.

Her own success resulted from years of hard work and determination. "You have to believe in yourself, and you have to have respect for your work," Moss said. "If you're true to yourself, it shows in your work."

Though she famously made Waynesboro her home, she has a soft spot for Roanoke, as it was there that her paintings first started to sell, she said.

The show at Moss Arts Center features an etching and 23 watercolors, including a series representing the four seasons in Appalachia, and a mountainous landscape called "Raven's Roost" that Hicklin cites as a work pushing the edge of the artist's unique style.

Moss, who has reportedly earned multimillions selling prints and merchandise, has not been widely embraced by the fine arts world. "There are those in the arts community that may not be the biggest fans of P. Buckley Moss," Hicklin said. "The bigger story with her is what she has done with that life."

The artist has raised millions to help important causes dear to her, and "she's done it doing what she loves," Hicklin said.

The late CBS television reporter Charles Kuralt called Moss "the people's artist" in a 1988 interview. Hicklin highlighted that as a major part of Moss' appeal: "She's one of us, and she's done good."