

Profile: MK Guth's quest for myth, one red ribbon at a time

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When [MK Guth](#) was growing up in Wisconsin, she dreamed about being a superhero or a character in a fairy tale. She devoured Hans Christian Andersen fables and Batman comic books, and was glued to the Saturday shows like "Superfriends" and "Isis" that indulged her imagination about people with superhuman powers fighting for truth, justice and to save the world.

"I liked characters who could do remarkable things, who had some sort of power and agency in the world," the Portland artist recalls. "A lot of how we initially order the world, and how we understand what's good or bad, comes from stories we're introduced to when we're very young."

At some point, most kids abandon the realm of fantasy for the grown-up realities of bills, worker-bee drudgery and raising their own children. But Guth, thanks to her art, has kept those youthful fascinations through her life.

"A lot of my work turns directly to myths as a starting point," she says.

There may be no more potent example of how mythology influences Guth's art than her current work, "Ties of Protection and Safekeeping," a massive braid of artificial golden hair displayed as part of the prestigious [Whitney Biennial](#) in New York City earlier this month. The work is rooted in the Brothers Grimm story of Rapunzel, a young girl held captive in a tower who eventually finds freedom through her long hair. [Bruno Bettelheim](#), the late child psychologist who believed fairy tales help children find purpose in their lives, described the story as one of hope, endurance and the passage from adolescence to the adulthood of "happily ever after."

Guth's braid incorporates those themes, but she says it also gives the symbolic tresses new meaning and relevance, as well as a less-clear final destination. "Rapunzel's braid is a vehicle of escape, but it's also ropes and chains. Through the braid, the fairy tale becomes a vehicle to talk about how we function in our world."

To create this discussion, Guth spent several months traveling around the country, asking art patrons: "What is worth protecting?" Their answers have been written onto thousands of red velvet ribbons, which were then woven into the braid. The journey culminated with its installation in a room at New York City's [Park Avenue Armory](#), where, for nearly two weeks in early March, Guth and a team of assistants braided in ribbons.

"The question of what's worth protecting operates on a lot of different levels -- on a global level, on a national level and on a personal level," Guth says. "What's worth protecting could be our Constitution, or it could be your job or your pet or your neighborhood park. It ultimately comes down to the individual. It's a really difficult question."

When you look at the braid up close and read those strands of ribbon, a very different -- and modern -- story emerges.

"*Social justice.*"

"*Dignity. Democracy.*"

"*Respeto y tolerancia.*"

"*Integrity!*"

Late last year, Guth huddled over a space heater in her drafty inner Southeast studio. Her work space is in a second-story warehouse above a used furniture store, and at times it gets so cold that you can see your breath when you exhale. Bundled in scarves and heavy sweaters, Guth walks through the bright room, talking about the braid she would create for the Whitney show, as well as her other works with themes of myth and transformation.

MK Guth

Age: 44

Lives in: Southeast Portland with husband Greg Landry and two cats.

Education: A bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison; a master's degree in fine arts from New York University.

Key influences: Minimalist painter and sculptor Eva Hesse, French surrealist artist Marcel Duchamp, Swiss Expressionist painter Paul Klee.

When she's not braiding: She's the chairwoman of the Master of Fine Arts Visual Studies Program at Pacific Northwest College of Art. Locally, her work is represented by the Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

Next up: On Saturday, she began a new braid at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. The braid from the Whitney Biennial goes on display at the Boise Art Museum in June.

Web sites: www.mkguth.com, www.whitney.org/biennial

Guth is a multi-disciplinary artist, and every corner of her studio has little installations showing her progression. In the late '90s, she went through a sculpting phase in which she created objects out of dead bees, animal bones, phone book pages and soap. At another juncture, she created 3-D lenticular portraits that explored femininity using imagery of Disney princesses. The sheer variety of her work -- and that a lot of it is more experiential than what's traditionally commercial -- makes it impossible to give her an easy-to-define label like sculptor, photographer or performance artist. If pressed to assign her a singular moniker, storyteller might be the best fit.

On her computer, she runs her short video "[I Want to Hold Your Hand](#)," a "Rashomon"-like tale. Guth plays a crime fighter, complete with an orange cape, who has stopped a thief but whose real motives are questioned by the police. As audio of her jailhouse interrogation plays, you see the attempted crime in ways that it may -- or may not -- have happened. The work, which [ART NEWS](#) critic Barbara Pollock described as "brilliant" in 2003, suggests that life for any would-be Wonder Woman may not be all it's cracked up to be.

"You may aspire to become a superhero," Guth reflects on the video while breathing into her hands to warm her fingers. "But we all have good days and we all have bad days."

In another corner are hundreds of pairs of bright red shoes from [Red Shoe Delivery Service](#), a project Guth collaborated on with artists Molly Dilworth and Cris Moss. Guth says the idea was to take a mythical object -- Dorothy's ruby slippers from "The Wizard of Oz" -- and create a real and entirely new experience for people.

"We were sitting at the kitchen table talking, and I said, 'Maybe I could give people free rides, and in exchange they would have to put on shoes.' At this point Molly said, 'If you do this, I'm interested, too, and I'll drive.' So I made a series of glittery red shoes, we rented a minivan and we traveled the cities of New York, assuming that we would be incredibly abused. We offered people free rides to wherever they wanted to go, and in exchange, they put on a pair of red shoes and said, 'There's no place like home.' "

Except they replaced the word "home" with wherever their heart desired: a taqueria; an art-supply store; the corner market.

Guth says the shoes make Red Shoe Delivery Service a piece about transformation: "When you put on these shoes, for a second they take you out of the everyday and put you in another place."

The trio re-created the project at art festivals throughout the world, including the [Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's Time-Based Art Festival](#) in 2004. It proved such a success that PICA's then-artistic director, Kristy Edmunds, invited Guth and her team to Australia the following year, when Edmunds took over as head of the [Melbourne International Arts Festival](#). In Melbourne, the project became the Red Shoe Delivery Service Travel Agency.

"That was the biggest thing we've ever done," she says. "Boy, was it ever."

In addition to free rides to places around town in their mobile gallery/van, they offered virtual travel.

People asked to be transported to everyplace from the moon to a fish market in China. Where people asked to go shaped the finished art installation of red shoes (now more than 450 pairs), video projections and virtual postcards, and Guth likes the idea that without audience participation, the art wouldn't exist at all.

Which is why those red ribbons and the public's musings on what's worth protecting are the heart of her braid in the Whitney show.

"The innocence of childhood."

"Reverence for all life."

*"The idea that our differences make a
much more interesting world."*

"Lives lived with grace."

In the middle of Guth's studio is a 350-foot braid created in Brazil early last year, the precursor to her current project. Draped over fire extinguisher pipes and suspended from massive hooks like a spider web, it's crafted out of various hues of fake hair and Carnival-colored ribbons, onto which Rio de Janeiro residents wrote their impressions of people from the United States. While some were poetic, many of the responses reflect America's unpopular standing these days in the international community.

"Some of them," she says, "said things like, 'I really like Mickey Mouse' and 'I really like the music from the U.S., but Americans are arrogant.'"

When Guth found out she was accepted into the Whitney Biennial, the experience in Brazil shaped the question she would ask for the new braid. Originally, she considered, "What is worth going to war over?"

"I felt that was too didactic," she says. "I felt like it was limiting the realm of possibilities of what this piece could be."

Besides, she thought, the Park Avenue Armory setting where the braid would be displayed would raise the issue of war on its own. This building was home to the first National Guard and has a distinct military feel. So she opted for the more open-ended, "What is worth protecting?"

In mid-December, she started the first strands of the Whitney braid in another armory -- the remodeled lobby of the Pearl District's Armory Building that houses [Portland Center Stage](#). On a Saturday afternoon, as hundreds of theatergoers streamed in for performances of "A Christmas Carol," Guth and her assistants handed out clipboards and Sharpie markers.

She was immediately struck by the wide range of answers woven into the 150 feet of braid she produced that day. This being Portland, many answers focused on the environment. Others took jabs at politics, and many embraced children and the values of home.

"One girl wrote that she wanted to protect her turtle."

"The freedom of women to choose."

"Our sexuality and imagination."

"Your vagina."

"The word 'sanctity' from politicians."

In the American art world, getting into the Whitney Biennial is the biggest coming out party imaginable. Every two years, curators from the Whitney Museum of American Art assemble a showcase of emerging artists, and in recent years, artists in Oregon or with roots in the state have been well represented. Former Portlanders [Miranda July](#) and [Gerry Snyder](#) were selected in 2002, along with University of Oregon art professor [Mary Flanagan](#), and [Chris Johanson](#), a Portlander then living in the Bay Area. In 2004, [Harrell Fletcher](#), a transplant from the Bay Area, was selected.

Because the stakes can be high (the biennial has turned such artists as [Chuck Close](#) and [Kenny Scharf](#) into stars), who gets chosen, and who gets left out, gets hotly debated.

[Kristan Kennedy](#), who runs the visual arts program for PICA, says Guth's inclusion among this year's 81 artists is huge, and she suspects there may be some jealousy at the root of a lot of Biennial bashing.

"It's really a hot button, whether people want to admit it or not," Kennedy says. "It's supposed to synthesize the two years of art making. This time around, I felt they hit a variety of artists, and MK's selection from Portland is really significant."

Kennedy says the question at the center of Guth's braid also is what makes it particularly of-the-moment.

"She's addressing this global issue of fear and protection," she says. "This idea of where humanity is at and where politics is taking us is really prevalent in artists' work right now. When you see one of those braids hung up and sprawled across a room, it operates on a number of levels. It's very beautiful, but it also has this subversive meaning."

"I'm gonna protect my rockin' family."

"My relationship with my mother."

"My free will -- and Lydia."

"My sweet, geeky boyfriend."

By the time the Whitney Biennial opens on March 6, the subversive nature of Guth's braid comes into clear focus.

In addition to the work she's done in Portland, there have been one-day braiding sessions in Boise, Houston, Cleveland, Atlanta and Chicago -- more than 500 feet of hair and ribbons that she can initially install in the armory's majestic Silver Room.

Guth strings the braid from the room's second-floor iron railing, with long strands draping down, almost to head level. The golden hair and its ribbons stand in sharp contrast to the room's low lighting, dark wood paneling and glass display cases filled with ornate swords and silver chalices.

For almost two weeks, Guth and her team continue adding to the braid until it's more than 1,600 feet long. As the braid grows, it's draped over more railings, crisscrossing the room in a seemingly random way, gradually obscuring the space's original look.

Guth marvels at how one myth is being supplanted with another. "This very masculine room is being consumed and replaced by this organic and feminine form."

Sitting on a red leather settee, Guth's hands work quickly, braiding more ribbons into the intertwined locks, pausing occasionally to talk with curious visitors who wind through the dangling sculpture.

"When people come in they interact with the work, but they also find it comforting that we're there braiding," she says. "It creates this temporary community."

Perhaps community is what "Ties of Protection and Safekeeping" is ultimately about. Whether you're from a community as large as New York or as intimate as Portland, it's made up of many voices, values and beliefs. Guth's braid suggests that the notion of "many" may be what's worth protecting more than anything.

One red ribbon at a time.

-- *Grant Butler*