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Broad exhibit takes student debt to task

THERE IS A PLACE TO PUT MONEY IN EVERY ONE OF THE ARTWORKS THAT MAKES UP "DAY AFTER DEBT."

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There is a place to put money in every one of the artworks that make up "Day After Debt."

Pop a coin into Ahmet Ögüt's "Anti-Debt Monolith," which stands in the western entryway to the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, and get a recorded disquisition on the state of student loan debt.

Throw a dollar into the plastic bag in Dan Perjovschi's "Bag It" and measure the resulting gratitude on a scale to the right. It runs from "You are responsible" to "You are my God."

Roll a quarter down Martha Rosler's "Coin Vortex for Student Debt" and watch it spiral away. And so on.

"We're not expecting to eradicate student debt with the quarters and dimes injected into these sculptures," said Michael Rush, the museum's executive director. "It's more really the notion of art addressing social issues in ways that are imaginative, new and perhaps challenging."

And, to some degree, practical. The money will go toward The Debt Collective, a group of artists and activists that works to bring debtors together around their shared conditions and to create a space for collective action, like a union with a different sort of constituency.

Debt is hardly an incidental subject on a university campus, even if the situation is not so dire at Michigan State University as it is at other schools.

The majority of MSU's 2013 graduates had no debt when they donned their caps and gowns, according to figures compiled by the Project on Student Debt. Among those who did have debt at graduation, the average was $25,821, well below the state average.

37 million in debt

Rosler's coin vortex was adorned with some broader statistics: the total amount of outstanding student loan debt (more than $1.1 trillion), the number of outstanding borrowers (roughly 37 million), the growth in student debt over the last decade (it has almost quadrupled).

It also has the artist's unequivocally expressed thoughts on student loans: "Blaming students for incurring debt, like blaming householders for incurring incomprehensibly encumbered mortgages, is like blaming the victims as though they were complicit. They were gulled, not complicit."

But it was the Sallie Mae logo, part of a graphic labeled "How students are victimized by predatory student loans," that drew Shaniqua McShan's attention. The giant student lender holds one of her loans, and her loans are never too far from her mind.

Donation Tower is one of the one of the pieces of art in the Day After Debt exhibition which is at the Broad Art Museum on the MSU campus. Photo taken 11/25/2014 by Greg DeRuiter/Lansing State Journal

(Photo: Greg DeRuiter)

"I'm in debt. I'm so in debt, and I know it," McShan said. She's a senior, studying education, hoping to get out of MSU owing less than $80,000.

That level of debt puts her in a small minority, but her situation is basically a recipe for high debt. Her mother earns enough money to limit the kind of federal aid she can get, McShan said, but her mother doesn't pay anything toward her education. She went to community college for more than three years before transferring to MSU. She's still had to borrow.

Rossler's quote about blaming victims makes sense to her.

"They say this generation is more of an entitlement generation, that we want what we want," she said, "but they're asking us, in order to get what we want, to run into $50,000 in debt before you're even in the real world."

Beyond 'logic'

The exhibit was the brainchild of Ögüt, a Turkish-born artist who now lives in Amsterdam. It emerged, he said, from a conversation about the most pressing issues in the U.S.

Student debt is a different issue overseas. European students in the Netherlands pay far lower tuition and, even if foreign students pay somewhat more, "it's nothing to compare with American standards," he said, which are clearly "beyond any reasonable logic."

There will be a second act to the exhibit. When it ends in April, the pieces will be sold. Ögüt worked with a lawyer to craft an agreement that would require future owners to continue raising money for The Debt Collective and to donate any proceeds from future sales of the works to the organization as well.

MSU students look at Anti-Debt Monolith which is one of the one of the pieces of art in the Day After Debt exhibition which is at the Broad Art Museum on the MSU campus. Photo taken 11/25/2014 by Greg DeRuiter/Lansing State Journal

(Photo: Greg DeRuiter)

Some buyers might comply with that, said Mari Spirito, curator of the exhibit and the director of an organization called Protocinema. But the assumption is that some won't, and that will create another opening for talking about debt.

"The time when they break the contract," she said, "will also be part of the project."

If you go

•Day After Debt: A Call For Student Loan Relief will run at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum on Michigan State University's campus through April 12. Admission to the museum is free. For more information, go to broadmuseum.msu.edu.

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