

IRVINGTON

Environmental issues inspire artist's 'Anxiety' project

BY JULIAN MICHAEL CALDWELL

Interdisciplinary artist Sari Nordman brings her fiber arts project rooted in environmental justice to the Irvington Public Library's Martucci Gallery this month. Titled "Anxiety," the exhibit serves as commentary on global fears around climate change and increasing natural disasters as curated by Nordman, an immigrant from Finland who lives in Mount Vernon.

"It's also globally thinking about all of the people who have been displaced throughout the world due to climate changes," Nordman told the Dispatch. "The refugee crisis and how it's being dealt with, and the problems of immigration, and the violent conflicts that may be caused by these environmental challenges that people are facing around the world because of droughts and flooding and extreme heat."

Central to Nordman's art is how plastic pollution contributes to climate change. Since 2019, recycled plastics have been the primary material in her work. Since coming to the U.S. in 1993 to study dance, Nordman has spent the majority of her years in New York, where she earned an MFA in dance from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts while also taking visual art classes.

During the pandemic Nordman went back to Finland, where her family does



Part of "Anxiety Work" from 2022

handicrafts such as ryijy, also called rya, which is a traditional Scandinavian knotted textile used as a wall hanging, blanket, or bedcover. While ryijy typically is done with wool yarn, Nordman began making versions using plastic and a knotting practice that includes participants of all ages.

"I cut the pieces, plus I invite people to donate plastic, and I let people make their

own designs as they're knotting," she said. "And because the process is very tedious and slow, it's not possible to finish these tapestries," she continued, "so then I use the colors that participants have used as color markers for myself to finish the design."

Nordman describes the process as simple enough that anyone who can tie their own shoelaces can do it, which means children

also participate. During a workshop Nordman will often explain the process to one or two people, and then let them pass along the instructions, like a game of telephone, which Nordman has seen spark conversation and build community.

"Every time that I have these social engagement events, I learn so much from people and I learn other people's anxieties with ecological changes," Nordman said. "When we're doing the work, it's like you have this sense of agency, like there's something you can do about these issues. There's the ecological anxiety, but at the same time I feel this calm from working with my hands and doing something about these challenging topics. And then when I get to invite people to join the process, that just adds to the joy."

"Anxiety" includes six of the fiber art pieces, with the largest measuring roughly 3 feet by 4 feet. Also on display are seven photographs from a series Nordman took of participants wearing some of the pieces she crafted in shapes like clothing. Each participant's personality comes out as they choose to pose with the art in different ways. It's a fitting exercise for Nordman, who considers herself a former performance artist, and with her dance background is constantly

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considering the role of movement in her art.

Nordman's exhibition also invites viewers to participate by answering prompts asking them how they connect with the landscapes where they grew up or live currently, and what solutions could help protect those landscapes. Nordman provides sticky notes for people to write their answers and display them in the gallery.

Nordman also hosts a podcast on YouTube called "Tower: Bridging Voices on Climate Change" where she talks to different people about their personal experiences with climate change. Her guests have included a woman who talked about how caravans of people left Honduras for the U.S. because droughts eliminated farming in their native land, and refugees who have left other countries where there were violent conflicts due to droughts and flooding.

"If we had more connection with nature, I think as human beings we would be healthier, happier, and more connected, and maybe more sympathetic as well," Nordman shared. "Nature has always been very important to me, and growing up in Finland, we consider nature as sort of our religious space. It's the church, the temple, the synagogue."

"Anxiety" is on display at the Martucci Gallery, 12 South Astor St., through the end of December. The gallery is open during normal library hours, from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, and 10 a.m.-9 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays.