Artist's 'Live Canaries' not just for the birds

By CHRIS COOK
Reporter

Catherine Ferguson is more than just an artist. She is a modern-day alchemist, changing ordinary things into objects of profound meaning and changing viewers into participants.

Catherine's installation, "Live Canaries," can be viewed in the Lied Education Center for the Arts Gallery.

Ferguson graduated from Creighton with a degree in English. At the time, the Fine and Performing Arts Department at Creighton had not yet fully developed.

"My English major has really influenced my work," she said. "I am always reading and I am definitely interested in the concept of metaphor. I love research."

In fact, her research of psychologist Carl Jung has inspired her fascination with alchemy, a pre-chemistry belief that materials like lead can be changed into gold, even if only for a split second.

"Jung studied the alchemists' findings, which were written completely in symbolic code," she said. "As he analyzed the code, Jung found what he believed to be evidence of a psychological transformation, not just an elemental transformation.

"The idea of such a transformation was so intriguing for me," she said. "It is, to me, the essence of what artists do. They try to take the lowest common materials and transform them into things of value and significance."

Ferguson has sought to achieve this sort of transformation through her work. In "Live Canaries," the element of transformation is subtle. In the current installation, Ferguson examines the metaphor of the canary in the coal mine.

The metaphor dates back to the country's early mining days. Miners kept canaries as pets and brought them down into the mountain as gauges for the air supply. When the canaries stopped singing, the miners knew to get out of the mine.

Also contributing to the installation are her son George Ferguson, a documentary filmmaker, and Mario Verandi, a European sound composer.

"Mario, George and I are telling the story using three different mediums," Catherine Ferguson explained.

George Ferguson put together a short film for the installation that explores his mother's various themes for the piece in the form of a narrative.

"This was the first installation piece I'd ever done," George Ferguson said. "Catherine generated the narrative component, so it was new territory for me. It was fun, not many people get the opportunity to work with an artist whose work they have always admired."

The installation marks the fifth collaborative effort for Verandi and Catherine Ferguson. For "Live Canaries," Verandi wanted to create all the sounds himself, rather than use field recordings of birds or echoes. The sounds fuse and provide an eerie, ethereal backdrop for Catherine's mine creation and her son's film piece.

"Their work fits together so well," George Ferguson added, regarding the work of Verandi and Catherine Ferguson. "Mario's sounds add so much depth. It really takes the art to another level, as a whole."

In "Live Canaries," the association of the canary with the miner is not the primary focus. Littleton Alston, an associate professor in the Fine and Performing Arts Department, pointed out the universal nature of Ferguson's work.

"Catherine's work is very relevant to ecological issues, spiritual issues and even shamanistic issues," Alston said. "'Live Canaries' reveals itself as a social commentary piece. Are artists the canaries? Are we the canaries? If so, who's listening?"

Catherine Ferguson focused on the canary in the metaphor.

"I wanted to give the canary a positive persona," she explained. "I wanted to contrast the dark, heavy, immovable mountain with the gold, light and active bird. The positive energy of the bird communicates a spiritual energy, an energy capable of transforming us."

Ferguson's installation can be seen in the Lied Center Gallery until April 8 from noon to 4 p.m. daily.