

Anne Patterson's immersive installation at Ringling a walk through a ribbon forest



Lennie Bennett, Times Art Critic

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People sometimes talk about getting lost in a work of art, of feeling almost physically drawn into it.

Pathless Woods gives you the real experience.

The new installation by Anne Patterson at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art is the most immersive in my memory. Strands of satin ribbon — 8,472 of them, more than 24 miles worth — hang from the ceiling of a darkened gallery. Music plays and projections are reflected on the ribbons, which gently envelop you as you walk through them. You do lose yourself in this full-on sensory experience.

"I've worked with ribbon for a long time," Patterson said in an interview at the museum. One of her best-known works was an installation at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco in which she hung about 20 miles of it from the church's soaring ceilings.

For *Pathless Woods*, she chose a palette of deep blues, pinks, roses, reds, greens and lighter blues, modulating the gradations for an ombre effect. Artist Adam Larsen shot videos of tree limbs and fluttering leaves in slow motion. As the images are projected onto the ribbons, they become suggestions, abstractions, of nature.

In another projection, Larsen filmed glitter falling. The pieces look like thousands of fireflies. A few spotlights surround the installation, but the space is mostly dark except for those fleeting video images — until you reach the center of the square-shaped work and are illuminated by a beam aimed straight down. The undulating shadows of the ribbons on the floor become a starburst. All the while, *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation*, a composition by Michael Gandolfi that has changing tempos, alters the tone of your walk.

Patterson, 56, has synesthesia, a condition in which one sensory experience triggers another kind. "I see shapes and colors when I hear music," she said. "Once when I heard a piece, I saw vertical lines. That led me to using ribbon."

The installation should be hugely popular with visitors, and a fair question to ask is why this is more art than entertainment.

For me it's the kind of wonder *Pathless Woods* inspires. It generates no rush of adrenaline, no jolting moment. It takes you into a new realm with a deepening sense of being in an environment that references real life but is removed from it. The ribbons caress you and in a subtle way encumber you too; at times you have to push them aside, so it becomes interactive, in a gentle way, and you become part of the art. The slight widening of the ribbons' width as you move closer to the center creates a subtle sense of density as if you're moving deeper into a forest.

Physically the work isn't large, so walking through it takes little time. Yet it invites you to pause, change course, enter and exit multiple times. I had the pleasure of walking it mostly alone and would think that doing so in a crowd would change the experience greatly. An additional sensation is added Thursday evenings when the museum remains open until 8. During that time, a scent designed for *Pathless Woods* by Beau Rhee will be sprayed. It smells of fir trees.

The title of the installation is taken from a line in a Lord Byron poem: "There is a pleasure in the pathless woods."

A quote from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden, or A Life in the Woods* is also appropriated.

Thoreau writes, "It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look."

This is a trip worth taking.

The art of commissioning art

Site-specific installations such as *Pathless Woods* are different from most other exhibitions in that they are created for a certain space with a unique goal.



How did it happen at the Ringling?

Matthew McLendon, curator of modern and contemporary art, had a lot to do with the process. Contemporary art is probably the most challenging of any period because it's so vast, without the filters of time. So of all the art he sees every year, how did this work by Patterson rise to the top?

"I have a lot of photos on my iPhone," he said. "I do so many studio and gallery visits (around the world). I have to have a strong gut feeling to an artist's work. By the time I download a photo (from a show), I already have a strong reaction. Even a negative reaction intrigues me."

"I met Anne at a chance meeting and was interested in her background in theater. She told me about the Grace Cathedral work. I was overwhelmed by how successful it was, how it heightened and complemented that space."

They had discussions about creating something for a small gallery at the Ringling. Patterson was unsure about it because of its size and height — only 18 feet — and she had only used ribbon that was suspended above the viewers. They talked about the ribbons having more density in the gallery.

"It was a revelation that you needed that for it to become an alternate reality. After that she was more confident."

Both Patterson and McLendon said that a collaboration such as theirs requires a great deal of trust.

"When choosing an artist," McLendon said, "I do a great deal of homework with other people who have worked with them. She has the reputation of always being prepared, professional, communicative."

Patterson, who has a degree in architecture from Yale University and one in theater design from the Slade School of Art, is a painter and sculptor, but most of her installations had been in performing arts spaces in conjunction with orchestral or stage performances. The one at Grace Cathedral had the same type of drama.

"She talked a lot about this not being a theater but a museum experience," he said. "She had to think a lot about the audience."

There were technical challenges beyond the conceptual: large industrial vents to work around, for example, and fire codes. And a budget that must be honored.

"Because we're part of Florida State University," McLendon said, "we have to budget really early out. We have to have a strong, well-reasoned projected budget. When surprises come up, you have a stronger foundation."

But, he said, "there was nothing that didn't succeed. The assembly line itself was a feat of artistry."

About 750 hours were racked up by volunteers who cut the ribbon and coiled each strand in a plastic bag. "She knew exactly the number of feet of ribbon. Not every artist has that logistical ability."

The last thing McLendon wants is to intervene.

"I'm not the artist. As a curator, I'm here to enable and empower. And there are 75 to 80 artists I'm dying to work with."

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>>Review

Pathless Woods

The installation is at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 5401 Bay Shore Road, Sarasota, through early May. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, with extended hours to 8 p.m. Thursday. Admission is \$25 adults, \$23 seniors, \$10 Florida teachers with ID and \$5 college students with ID and youths 6 to 17. It includes admission to Ca d'Zan and the Circus Museum. The art museum only is free on Mondays. (941) 359-7400 or ringling.org.

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