



Artist returns to Valley for kitchen exhibit

January 19, 2012

By ANDY GRAY Tribune Chronicle

Jennifer Vanderpool's work has been shown in Mexico, Colombia, Hungary, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and throughout the United States.

With the Cortland native invited to create an installation for the Butler Institute of American Art, she knew she wanted to create something that reflected the Mahoning Valley's history as well as her own interests.

She found both in "Hometown Story: Youngstown Steel Kitchens," which opens Sunday at the Youngstown museum.

The metal kitchen cabinets and appliances were built in Warren by Mullins Manufacturing Corp., and she discovered the company and its products while doing research online.

"I was trying to do something that related to the area, especially since I grew up there," Vanderpool said during a telephone interview from her home in Los Angeles. "A lot of my work deals with domestic and gender roles, and I'm interested in that period in architecture and design."

While the area's ties to the steel industry have been well documented, "Hometown Story" is designed to look at the "domestic industrial" side of what was the Valley's economic driving force.

During her research, Vanderpool found archival films that were used to motivate sales staff and advertise the company's products.

"Those were great finds for me," she said. "I had absolutely no idea they existed, and it didn't occur to me that they would exist."

Those films are incorporated into the installation along with Vanderpool's manipulations of print ads and Youngstown Steel Kitchen products.

The installation is designed to work on multiple levels, she said. Some viewers can take it as a historical look at a product produced in the Valley, while others can see it as an ironic commentary on an idealized image that was being marketed and sold to the public.

"You're supposed to think, 'Is it real? Is it not real? Is it nostalgic for a period that never existed?' Vanderpool said. "It plays on what society looked like at that time. What is really being portrayed is the ideal, not the reality."

Vanderpool's family still lives in the area, and she usually gets back a couple times a year, but she's looking forward to coming back this weekend to the museum she remembers visiting as a child with her parents.

"I'm very grateful that (Butler Director) Dr. (Louis) Zona invited me to do this exhibit and have an exhibit at the local museum," she said. "It's a nice honor."