'Lost Bells' wins top art award

By GEOFFREY CUNNINGHAM Jr.

Thousands of miles from the violence and political unrest of Colombia, Amparo Carvajal-Hufschmidt worked away with plaster in her small rural Alton studio. While she was sculpting the forms of her most ambitious work yet, it was context that she focused on as 11 forms came together into one.

Although she was born in Bucaramanga, Colombia, Amparo has lived in Alton for the last 12 years. On January 24 she received the “Currier Gallery of Art Award” for her sculpture “Lost Bells” currently on display at the New Hampshire Art Association’s 33rd annual exhibit.

While Amparo claims she never expected to win the award, a stroll into the Currier gallery’s NHAA exhibit might speak to why the unconventional artist took the exhibition’s top prize.

Amid walls full of skillful renderings, carefully crafted landscapes and vibrant sceneries, one finds 11 seemingly identical pairs of feet all in a row and shrouded in cloth.

Strikingly ominous in their initial appearance, Amparo says the installation draws an interesting response for those who view it.

“It is curious — when people first walk up to the sculpture they often laugh, but when they approach the middle of the row they stop,” said the artist.

No question the main reason observers halt their laughter is the installation’s main focus; the degradation of life and the physical annihilation of the human condition occurring across the globe and in her native land of Colombia.

The image made real by “Lost Bells” originated in the photos of a Brazilian photographer who documented the mass murder and genocide occurring in many South American nations. Amparo said that she wished to capture the images that have become sadly commonplace in many violent areas.

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The piece was inspired by the political situation in Columbia which is quite bad. I am not with any faction, but the violence is getting so out of control. In the countryside they pile up and cover the bodies by the edge of the road. All you can see are the victims' feet," said Amparo.

While Amparo admits that she is often drawn to the violence occurring in her country of birth, she said that she sculpted the piece as a more global testament to violence.

"These images repeat and the same human condition can be found in places in Africa, Bosnia and other nations. When I began to mold the feet I thought of making each pair different, but I changed my mind," said Amparo.

She said that by keeping all 11 pieces virtually identical she hoped to convey a blank and universal honesty that could link the image to any location. Amparo added that the choice of number was also deliberate.

"If 10 or less people are killed the media and other people never seem to make a big deal out of it. Ten wasn't enough and 12 seemed too many so 11 became the right number," said Amparo.

Before entered in the NHAA exhibit, "Lost Bells" was part of a series of works entitled "Images from the Dark Land."

The Secession series, which began in 1997, was originally inspired by musical composer George Crumb's interpretation of the Kronos Quartet, Black Angels.

Amparo, who primarily deals in woodcuts and printmaking, began her endeavor to create the three-dimensional, "Lost Bells" at a studio in Boston where she received instruction in the making of plaster and rubber molds.

She then returned to her small studio in Alton to actually form each individual piece of the installation.

"It was quite labor intensive and I had never done anything like it before. It took me about six weeks last summer to complete the process," said Amparo.

While the piece took hours to craft, Amparo said she remained concentrated on the purpose of the piece whose universality creates a vacuum for multiple interpretations.

"Lost Bells" isn't a political statement, but a depiction whose form invites an introspective awareness of events that continue to shape our world around us.

"Because it is shown to many people art is always a social statement and also a personal statement. Context is so important and I hope the piece makes people focus and think about how they perceive society. I just hope it gets a reaction whatever it may be," said Amparo.

"Lost Bells" certainly got a reaction at this year's juried exhibition. Carol R. Wärner, who chose Amparo's piece out of hundreds of masterful works, described the exhibition's sculptural pieces as surprising in their "originality and boldness."

While winning the award was a wonderful surprise according to Amparo, she said she is simply happy that "her most serious piece" can be on display and viewed by the public.

Amparo Carvajal-Hufschmid's "Lost Bells," as well as works by other members of the NHAA continue on display at the Currier Gallery of Art in Manchester through February 25. Amparo's "Recent Works" exhibition at the Ave Gallery in Lebanon