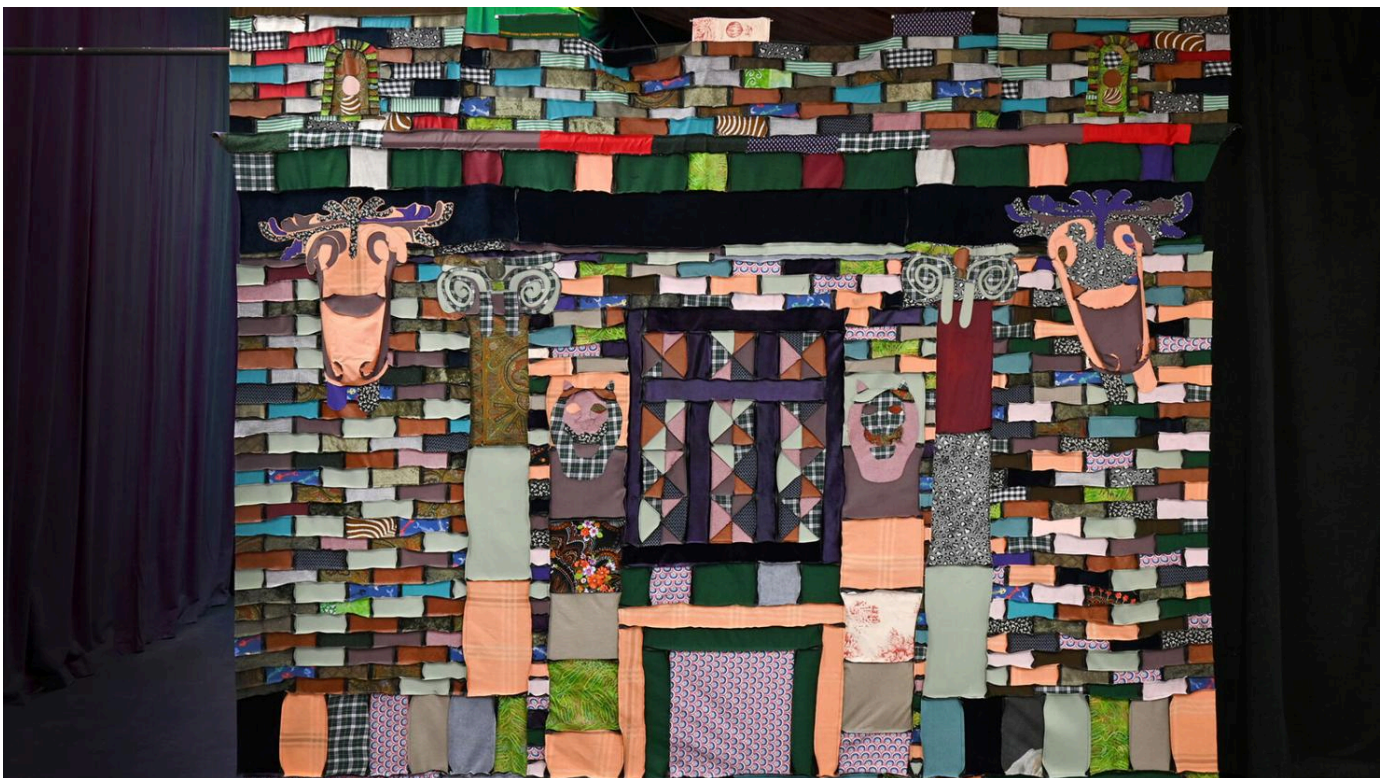


https://www.channel3000.com/madison-magazine/help-close-the-case-of-the-missing-n/article_6c6c7f1c-8ff1-11ef-8e34-2756f2ac7098.html

Help close the case of ‘The Missing N’

The decades-old story — connecting a quirky Spring Green folk artist, a historic bank building, diligent archivists and a new art installation in the Netherlands — continues.

Maggie Ginsberg Oct 22, 2024



This quilt is part of an art installation by Lili Huston-Herterich to honor the work of late Spring Green artist Peg Miller. The quilt depicts the exterior of the former State Bank of Spring Green, which Miller turned into her home.

Photo by Lili Huston-Herterich

Last June, in my historical Looking Back column that runs on the back page of Madison Magazine each month, we ran a Henry A. Kosholek photo that hadn't been published in 44 years — not since it originally appeared in a January 1980 article in The Capital Times.

I titled my column “The Missing N” and wrote about the unlikely series of events that led to Wisconsin Historical Society archivists discovering and preserving Kosholek's negatives, all because I'd gone looking for photographic evidence of a hilarious story I'd heard about the late Spring Green folk artist Peg Miller. The short

version: Miller lived inside the former State Bank of Spring Green, and when public officials told her she needed to take down the sign in order to comply with regulations, she simply removed the N, as seen below.



Photo from Wisconsin Historical Society 164608

You can read that Looking Back column for the rest of *that* story. My point is, that June 2024 column closed the loop on a tale that began a half-century ago and provided an ending — or so I thought.

Then, a few weeks ago, I got a message from a Chicago artist named Lili Huston-Herterich.

“I recently did an oral history work on Peg Miller, an artist who lived and worked in a bank in Spring Green, Wisconsin, who is also my mother’s aunt,” Huston-Herterich wrote. “One big part of my research was trying to find the missing N, and I was so excited to find a post on Madison Magazine’s Instagram with your article quoted on this exact subject!”

Huston-Herterich wasn’t sending the message from Chicago, but from Amsterdam, where she is halfway through a two-year artist residency — because of that, she could see our Instagram posts but was somehow blocked from accessing our website, she said.

By the way, Huston-Herterich added in the message, she had been working all summer on a glow-in-the-dark ceramics molding of a big letter N for an exhibit, and she was making a letter D to go with it.

A letter D?

“Peg used to joke that she was going to replace the N with a D so it read ‘Spring Greed,’” Huston-Herterich explained. “That was Peg!”

Charmed and curious, I sent her a PDF copy of the article.

After Huston-Herterich responded to my email, I learned even more about the work she’s doing to honor the memory of her late great-aunt — a woman she “might have met” once but whose art left an indelible impression. Huston-Herterich started her two-year artist residency last year at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, where she started researching Miller’s work in earnest.

“[This] meant for the first time in my artistic career, I was being paid a stipend to research, develop and make work,” she says. “I started researching Peg for many reasons.”

Those reasons included thinking about how difficult it is for artists to pursue lifelong practices in an economic and social environment that offers only sparse support. Or about art as a therapeutic practice to overcome addiction, something Miller did proudly in her former bank building. Huston-Herterich was also interested in the ways in which an artistic practice can preserve certain histories, and how the art world identifies “outsider” or “folk” artists.

It was around that time that she heard about the River Valley ARTS auction, during which a number of Miller’s donated works would be sold to raise money for the arts.

“I thought it was a perfect occasion to get in touch with relatives that I had never spoken to before, and friends of Peg, to ask for their memories of the bank and of Peg,” she says. “These conversations bloomed into bigger, more complex narratives than I was expecting.”

(Meanwhile, 4,000 miles away, I was reading that same press release about the auction, which we wrote about on madisonmagazine.com, and hearing about the missing N for the first time, and wondering if a photo existed that could prove the story ... which would later lead to the Looking Back column — but not yet.)

In Amsterdam, Huston-Herterich got to work telling the story of Miller and the bank “in all of the complicated ways I encountered,” she says. She made an installation called "The Treasury" that included a large quilted textile work that replicated a portion of the bank; a detailed, annotated script; and a 12-minute, two-channel video, in collaboration with Spring Green artist, actor and cinematographer Asa Derks, in which they used puppets, poetry and song to tell Miller’s story.

Huston-Herterich tried to find out more about the missing N, tracking down current and former owners of the registered national historic building that now is home to the restaurant Reunion. “I wanted to ask them if Peg had saved the N all 30 years of her living there,” she says. “I really wouldn’t be surprised if she did, considering she changed almost nothing of the interior or exterior of the bank that she wasn’t forced to.” Alas, nobody had any idea where the missing N went.

After a conversation with an old friend of Miller’s in which Huston-Herterich learned about Miller’s joking desire to put up a D in the missing N’s place, she decided she would create ceramic, glow-in-the-dark replicas of both the N and the D to add to the exhibit, just in time for a new showing at a Düsseldorf museum called Philara that opened Oct. 20.



Ceramic imagining of the D that could have replaced the missing N

Photo by Lili Huston-Herterich

Huston-Herterich had also had a terrible time tracking down photos of the bank building before Miller removed the N. She was just firing the N and the D replicas in the kiln when she stumbled across Madison Magazine’s post on Instagram about the Looking Back column and reached out to me.

“When I saw the image you published with the Looking Back column, I was shocked!” says Huston-Herterich, who plans to return to Spring Green with Derks to interview people who purchased Miller’s work through the River Valley ARTS Auction for a follow-up project — and she is still hopeful the real Missing N will turn up.

Maybe even someone reading this article will know where it is and reach out.

“Perhaps now we can get to the bottom of this mystery together,” she says.

Maggie Ginsberg is the managing editor at Madison Magazine.

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