

Shining the light

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The six panels are large, about 5 feet wide and 8 feet high, and painted in magnificent bright hues.

But then, you would expect nothing less for a depiction of the creation.

Housed in the chapel at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary, each panel represents one day of God's handiwork -- night and day, the heavens and seas, vegetation, the sun and moon, fish and birds and Adam and Eve.

The work of Bloomfield-based artist Christina Saj, the "Six Days of Creation" exhibit was inspired by the biblical book of Genesis and made specially for the circular worship space at the institution, said Rosemary Carroll, director of development. It is part of an effort to bring art and religion together at the school, which Carroll said is the oldest seminary in the country.

"The purpose is to essentially inform our faculty and students that you can minister through the arts," she said. "She works with our faculty and students to show how painting can enhance the ministerial message in church."

The New Brunswick seminary, located behind the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, was founded



New Jersey artist Christina Saj stands in front of three of the six panels she created depicting the six days of creation at the chapel of New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

in 1784 by the Reformed Church of America. About 200 students, mostly commuters within a 50-mile radius of the school, study religion toward master's or doctorate degrees in theology and divinity. The school also has a branch on the campus at St. John's University in Queens, N.Y., Carroll said.

Saj, who has been painting professionally for 10 years, was chosen as the second "Artist in Residence" for the school after its directors interviewed several New Jersey-based artists. Last year, a singer was selected for the program.

It was while teaching a course about sacred spaces that Saj decided she would show faculty and students how art can aid their work by creating something visual and concrete for their own school.

"I thought it would be fun and more meaningful to

engage the space they have feelings about," Saj said.

Saj labored over the project for more than four months, painting each panel at her Montclair studio, and not in chronological order.

"Sometimes you're inspired in a particular direction, and sometimes you get stumped," she said of the artistic process.

Painting iconic pieces for Saj, who has had her art shown in the White House, means bridging the break between ancient tradition and modern acceptance of art.

"My work comes from a very respectful place in terms of religion," she said. "But I don't want to replicate 15th-century technique. I want my work to resonate with the population now."

So far, her artwork has.

The exhibit is scheduled to be up until May 30, but feedback for the project has been so positive that there's talk of housing the panels

permanently in the circular worship space.

"We have some alumni who hope to raise the money to purchase them," Carroll said, adding the discounted price for the artwork is \$30,000.

Saj said she is thrilled her work could have such an impact.

"It's awesome for me because it's an opportunity to explore church decoration," she said.

The pieces are available for public viewing Mondays through Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., Fridays from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to noon. A reception with Saj is scheduled for Saturday from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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