

Tribune Chronicle

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YOUNGSTOWN — Jennifer Vanderpool has no memory of Youngstown as a thriving steel town.

The Cortland native and 1989 Lakeview High School graduate would have been starting elementary school when Youngstown Sheet and Tube announced the closing of its Campbell Works on Sept. 19, 1977, a date known as Black Monday.

Vanderpool now lives in Los Angeles, but she would come home frequently to visit family.

“My dad and I would go to Mill Creek Park to run,” she said. “I would look at the old mills (on the drive). Around that time, there were these lists of the most dangerous cities, and Youngstown was one of those places. I was never in the city when it was this big industrial place, and I decided I needed to learn more about where I grew up.”

As an artist, she decided to explore those questions through her work, and Vanderpool’s “Untold Stories: The Forgotten Under Class in Rust Belt Urban Renewal” opens Friday at Youngstown’s Tyler History Center.

Using images from the archives of the Mahoning Valley Historical Society, Vanderpool created large-scale photo collages in the vein of her work, which has been awarded funding by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, the National Endowment for the Arts Challenge America grant and other national and international arts organizations.

“One thing I didn’t want to do is ghost the people who live in the community,” she said. “I wanted to hear stories from people in the community.”

Vanderpool made three different monthlong trips back to northeast Ohio to interview residents, community leaders, artists and others talking about their experiences and their hometown. Video of those interviews will accompany the artwork.

Each element of the exhibition influenced the other.

"I kind of worked on them hand in hand," she said. "Once I came up with the idea for the exhibition, I started working on the prints and interviews together. I think of them as one project.

"I think of myself as a storyteller. Rather than using (only) printed works, I think of my exhibitions as having different mediums in them, but it's all one project ... It's not so much a personal narrative. It is the culmination of a community narrative, but I'm the one telling the story. I've organized it."

Vanderpool will talk about her creative process in a lecture at 5:10 p.m. today at the McDonough Museum of Art, and "Untold Stories" will be on display through April 7 at the Tyler History Center. A companion exhibition focusing on the city of Akron will be on display from March 11 to April 19 at the University of Akron's Emily Davis Gallery.

In her artist statement for the show, Vanderpool writes, "Together the venues work hand in hand to query the social, political, economic, and racial crises faced by these legacy cities located 50 miles apart in Northeast Ohio."

Leann Rich, external relations manager for the Mahoning Valley Historical Society, said the Tyler History Center has featured art exhibitions in the past.

"The themes of urban renewal and the Rust Belt really tied in nicely with our mission. It's nice to bring our audience something different," Rich said.