

THE BENTON COUNTY
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TERRIFYING HILARIOUS REAL! Reactions flow at PostSecret exhibit opening

By Jeff Mores

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Sunday photograph by David Frank Dempsey Sarah Calvert was one of the first patrons to view the PostSecret show of postcards at Crystal Bridges at the Massey in Bentonville on the show's opening morning on Saturday in Bentonville.

BENTONVILLE - When the doors to Crystal Bridges at the Massey opened Saturday morning, the audience was waiting. Visitors continued to spill through the new exhibit - PostSecret - through the morning and early afternoon. The looks on their faces and comments rolling off their lips were as varied and genuine as the more than 400 postcards on display.

"This is sick!" one adult announced while shaking his head and reaching for the door. Then there was Ryan Nichols, a 13-year-old Pea Ridge resident, who spent the better part of an hour absorbing each of the anonymous secret-bearing postcards displayed through the exhibition space at 125 W. Central Ave. "I think it's very artistic, actually. I didn't know what it was going to be and I was very surprised. I was shocked. But then I realized this is kind of how the world works. There are so many secrets."

PostSecret founder Frank Warren, a Germantown, Md. resident, has never suggested the traveling exhibition version of the Post-Secret phenomenon is for everyone. Instead, the exhibit of postcards, sent anonymously from people around the world, are intended to unflinchingly expose our rich interior lives, showing the best and worst of what dwells there. The collection - which has also been exhibited through Warren's popular Web site www.postsecret.com and four best-selling books - is simply installed and open to interpretation, reaction and opinion.

A glass case just inside the Central Avenue doors features a collection of some of the more elaborately decorated postcard secrets Warren has received to date. One such postcard had actually been crafted out of a deflated balloon with the message "It's a Boy," printed on it. The hand written secret scrawled below read: "When we decided to keep you, your life wasn't the only one saved."

And, for several visitors on Saturday morning, that was where the reaction started.

"I'm fascinated by old letters and secrets anyway, but this exhibit is truly impactful," Tricia Hughes said. "It's thought provoking. It's deep, whether you like it or not."

A series of three postcards pasted together show a mountainous landscape with wildflowers springing up everywhere. The secret reads: "Dad - I understand why you killed yourself and it makes me not want to be a father 'cause, deep down I know I'm just like you."

Toward the back of the exhibition space, another postcard reads: "I was molested. There, I said it."

That's why Warren, who started the PostSecret project four years ago by passing out blank postcards to strangers in hopes they would return them with inner secrets for display in an exhibition in Washington, D.C., continues to facilitate the PostSecret phenomenon. When the original exhibition ended, Warren continued to receive postcards, now totaling more than 150,000. The secrets on the postcards range from sad to funny, brave to shocking, and the front of the postcards, in many cases, were handcrafted by their senders, making them individual works of art.

One such postcard selected for display at Crystal Bridges at the Massey features a photo of a mixed drink and the message, "I drink too much and hope that someone worries."

Another postcard, which includes an empty medication bottle, includes the secret, "I take too many because they make me skinny ... and I'd rather have a seizure than be fat."

"Some of the secrets are terrifying and some are hilarious," said Mary Mumma, who visited the exhibit during its opening hour Saturday. "It's so real. We don't often get to see people open up like this. It's what everyone keeps inside. I can see how someone might feel uncomfortable looking at something like this, but I hope this is what Crystal Bridges will continue to be like when the big museum opens - a huge eclectic mix."

A few of the postcards had been blown up to poster size for display, one of which included the message, "I erase a few of my ex-boss's important Voicemails each week for fun."

Another secret was creatively scrawled onto a postcard-sized black mask, with the secret: "A while ago, my postcard said, 'My boyfriend doesn't know I'm a lesbian. No one does.' Well, now everyone knows and it feels great."

That particular postcard prompted one visitor to whisper - apparently to himself - "This exhibit is different. That's for sure."

"I'm so-so on the exhibit," said Linda Brewer, who attended the PostSecret opening with her husband Marty and grandson Logan. "I didn't find it as interesting as some people apparently did. I'm just not sure about some of the material. But I'm still excited about Crystal Bridges. We needed some kind of culture. I don't have to agree with everything but we needed something like this here."

PostSecret will remain open for interpretation and reaction at Crystal Bridges at the Massey through Feb. 1.