

# MONKS

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Tuesday from 10 to 11 a.m., but a sign announcing the event was recently whitened out to read 11 a.m.

But it's 11:07, and the monks still aren't here.

"Maybe another hour," a von Liebig worker whispers to another.

People awaiting the monks mill about, some gathering in little clumps in the lobby to talk, others looking at the art.

Some leave. In a town where some are used to being waited on and possess an over-developed sense of entitlement, any cause for waiting on their part is seen as a personal affront.

A photographer periodically uses her cell phone to update her newspaper.

The monks are late.

"Maybe they're teaching us patience," one woman says.

The monks finally arrive, entering through a side door. In private, they set up their space in the gallery, preparing for the opening ceremony.

When the doors to the gallery open - it's now past noon - the monks, dressed in deep red robes, gather around a square blue table. They all have shaved heads, or closely cropped hair.

People file in and sit in the semi-circle of chairs placed around the table. Some stand.

The monks, with orange cloth wrapped around their maroon robes, place yellow felt headdresses on their skulls. The headdresses have Big Bird-yellow yarn standing straight up like a plume, like bright yellow Mohawks.

One of the monks speaks, and Tsering Dhondup translates. They are doing this mandala to bring more peace and prosperity, he says, and will make the mandala according to tradition. The opening ceremony is to consecrate the area and bless the space.

No one is to take photographs during the ceremony. No one can take aerial shots either, as they consider the mandala to be three-dimensional, not two-dimensional. Although the sand mandala will be created on the table, the space above it is also sacred to the monks.

Another table has been set up. It holds a vase of flowers in yellow, salmon and red, a bowl of fruit with oranges, bananas and a pineapple, and a photo of the Dalai Lama. It also holds 34 plastic cups, the kind you'd use to drink punch or cheap wine from at an art opening.

But these cups are filled with brightly colored sand in cobalt blue, blood red, emerald green. The sand is almost Technicolor. The white is a white you'd want your laundry to be - or the unnatural white of someone's overly bleached teeth. The black is a velvet-y starless night, or the impenetrable black of the middle of a forest when you're lost.

The dyed sand, which has been blessed, comes from India.

The monks begin to chant.

One starts, then the others join him.

It is a deep, guttural sound, as if their voices are didgeridoos or an old 78 record played at 33 1/3.

It sounds like James Earl Jones with a nasty cold, testing his lowest register.

The people stand respectfully, listening. Some have their hands clasped in front of them in prayer, eyes closed.

From time to time the chanting changes in tone, in rhythm, in speed. Suddenly, they are harmonizing.

Dhondup explains later that when the monks chant in such a deep, gravely way, they're using their "inner voice."

"They work at it for 10, 15 years," he says. "A lot of people feel the energy when they do it. There are different chantings. Some have to be specific about using their inner voice. Sometimes the chanting is high-pitched. They each have their own meanings. Some of the monks since the age of 8 or 9 have been studying their whole life in the monastery."

Then the monks start blowing horns. To Western ears, it sounds discordant. One has deep foghorn tones, like a tuba. The others sound like bagpipes tuning up.

The gallery housing the monks' mandala also houses the von Liebig's current art exhibit, Art Expressions 2007, an invitational show with work from artists around the state.

There's photography, sculpture, batik, painting.

One 60 x 48-inch oil painting, "Standing Fast" by Roger Sherman, shows a female nude staring at the viewer, hips jutted out.

It's a jarring juxtaposition to the devout monks, who seem oblivious to it.

The monks are used to working in many different environments says Dhondup. The nudes do not bother them.

Mandala is Sanskrit for circle, representing wholeness, completeness.

This particular mandala the monks are making is a representation of the Buddha of compassion. It will take them four days. According to information the von Liebig hands out, mandalas have outer, inner and secret meanings.

The monks wear surgical masks, so not to disturb or contaminate the sand. Each places the sand in a thin, metal funnel and scrapes a stylus against its side so the sand flows out evenly.

Scratch! Scratch! It's like they're playing tiny zydeco rubboards.

Four monks lean over the table, their heads almost touching. They start with the center and work outwards, following the outlines permanently etched onto the tabletop. The center is an emerald green circle.

There is something compelling about watching the mandala take shape, its bright colors almost glowing on the dull

blue tabletop.

Some refer to Naples as the millionaires' playground. It's a city often accused of being soulless or spiritually shallow, with people who worship money and image.

"Do you know of Naples's reputation for materialism, that people here are primarily interested in accumulating more wealth and are only interested in how things look?" I ask Dhondup.

He smiles and says simply, "That is why we're here."

The monks set up a small table off to the side with wares for sale - hand-made books, CDs of their chanting, beads. A monk picks up a metal bowl to show me. Holding it on his outstretched palm, he hits the bowl with what looks like a wooden pestle, then runs the wood around the rim of the bowl.

Its rich, deep ringing resonates inside me. The sound goes on and on.

Suddenly, I'm overwhelmed with joy. My eyes well up.

It's like a tuning fork getting my soul back in tune.

I tell a couple of friends about it afterwards, but I have no explanation.

The sand mandala is a transient piece of art.

It is created to bless, but it's also created, ultimately, to be destroyed.

It represents the impermanence of everything in life (impermanence being one of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths.)

I'm not sure I need a sand mandala to remind me of the impermanence of life, though. In the week prior to the monk's arrival, I buried two friends who died within 36 hours of each other. Beth, an award-winning writer and former co-worker, was 45. And Gaye, a classically trained cellist who could play the most uninhibited and inspired funk/jazz improvisations on that instrument, was only 54.

Neither thought their life would end so soon.

They probably thought they were staring at mid-life, not the end of their lives.

The day the monks arrive, my oldest brother is hospitalized and spends his first two days in the Intensive Care Unit with a blood clot in his leg and blood clots in his lungs.

It's all sand, it's all temporary. Everything changes. And none of us knows how quickly the sand is slithering through the hour glass.

All we have is now.

On Friday, the monks gather for the closing ceremony.

The mandala is completed: a circle in a square in a square in a circle. The image is complex, colorful. It's amazing they've done so much in so little time.

The gallery is packed; standing room only. The von Liebig claims 500 people are there, but a more realistic number is

perhaps half that.

The monks speak, Dhondup translates.

"Why are we making this sand mandala? For the Buddha of compassion," he says. "We need compassion, love and compassion, to make this world a better place to live. The mantra in the middle [of the mandala], it is the seed for compassion."

He speaks of the importance of having a good heart, a kind heart to help others. Part of the reason they will dismantle the mandala and return the sand to the sea is to bless the rest of the world and bless those in the water too.

There are more sentient beings in the ocean than on the earth, they say.

"All sentient beings want happiness," the monk says.

Returning the sand to the Gulf is also meant to protect the area from hurricanes and natural disasters.

The six monks put on their headdresses and begin chanting again. At times, it sounds like Native American chanting. A friend with a Roman Catholic background later says it reminded her of Gregorian chants. At one point, they walk around the mandala a number of times in a clockwise direction.

Then, a monk puts a line through the mandala. Suddenly, they are all sweeping up the sand, putting it into a glass vase that used to hold flowers. They then place a quilted cloth made of triangular shapes over the vase in the center of the table.

The monks continue chanting, periodically tossing flower petals onto the table.

They then leave the art center, walking single file down Park Street to 8th Avenue South, where they turn west and continue to the Gulf. Maybe 70 people follow them, the curious, the skeptical, the devout, the hangers-on. It's like an updated scene out of a Fellini film.

Some choose not to walk to the beach, instead driving the handful of blocks in their BMWs, Saabs and Cadillacs.

The monks walk past multi-million dollar homes, prime real estate. Some residents stare out of their windows, surprised.

More people join the little parade at the beach; curious people in their swim suits wondering at this unusual sight. The monks' orange and red outfits and yellow headdresses stand out vividly against the white sand and the cloudy, milky sky.

People form a semi-circle around the monks, facing the Gulf. The monks blow their horns and chant some more. Then one takes off his shoes and walking to the Gulf's edge, steps into the turquoise water. Waves darken the edge of his robe. He gently spills the sand from the vase, sending out blessings to the whole world.

The sand, which was so wildly colorful in the mandala, now looks dull and unremarkable.

Like all things, it has returned back to the earth. ■

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