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Whitney Nye has created paintings, ceramic pieces and other items from wood, paper, wax and plaster to be installed as a single artwork.

A show of extraordinary proportions

By JANET GOETZE
THE OREGONIAN

LAKE OSWEGO —

Few galleries have the space for huge paintings, but the Art Gym at Marylhurst University can accommodate a 30-foot-long canvas, a couple at 23 feet and one measuring 11 feet in diameter.

Curator Terri Hopkins, known among Northwest artists for promoting challenging ideas, invited four artists to display big canvases in those big spaces

You'll need to stand away from the paintings at Marylhurst University Art Gym's "Exponential"

from Sunday through Feb. 15.

Hopkins contacted the artists — Michael Knutson and Whitney Nye of Portland, Jeffrey Simmons of Seattle and Philip Krohn of Oakland, Calif. — because she saw similarities in their abstract works and was curious what would happen if they expanded their themes.

"The idea of the exponential interested me," said Hopkins, an art historian.

Knutson often paints swirling, spiraling forms. Nye has produced works in several media, including some with round shapes that have the effect of a single work if arranged on one wall. Simmons recently produced a series with

circles. Krohn has worked with the idea of open-ended, incomplete art and recently created 60-foot-long street scrolls for the cities of Oakland and Berkeley.

Their show, titled "Exponential: 4 Huge Paintings," might raise such questions as "How big is too big?" and "How small is too small?"

"Will they hold up? Will they be exciting?" Hopkins said. "There is a level of drama involved."

Knutson, 49, who has been a faculty

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Show: Artists find larger scale challenging

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member for 18 years at Reed College, completed a 9½-by-21-foot painting in three sections but hasn't seen it in final form because it is too big to hang in his studio.

"The thing about size is you don't know what the effect is going to be," he said. "You hope you're blown away by it, or it could be wallpaper."

In fact, after accepting Hopkins' invitation to paint a big canvas, Knutson said, "I wondered why I was doing this."

At one time, he did 15-foot and 21-foot paintings as a matter of

course. He thought modern art was supposed to be big. When he realized the work wasn't selling, and he was running out of storage space, he turned to smaller canvases.

"Very few people have walls for 8-by-15-foot paintings," he said. "Most Northwest homes have small walls and very large windows for looking at the scenery."

But art created for public spaces often is large, Hopkins said. As a member of the public art advisory committee of the Regional Arts and Culture Council, she hopes the works in the show will be considered for public display somewhere.

Meanwhile, Simmons, 32, who

isn't accustomed to a big scale, enjoyed completing the largest canvas he's ever stretched. Although Hopkins invited him into the show because of his series on circles, only his canvas remained round. He decided graduated layers of acrylic arranged in lines would be more interesting than round shapes on a round canvas.

"I'm used to working on something where every little detail counts," Simmons said. "With this one it's — well, to appreciate it, you have to get way back."

He found it "a freeing experience. It's a great opportunity to experiment with a medium I've never used before."

Nye, 34, who works in an industrial district studio in Northwest Portland, created separate units from plaster, wax, paper and wood. The units will be installed to interact as a single work on a 23-foot-long wall.

Creating a large work "feels more open to me," she said. "Instead of working so small, I feel I'm not so contained. It feels like I'm opening up the doors and walking outside."

Similarly, Knutson said his new painting brought up ideas for him to explore in future art. He added, "I returned to my studio at the end of the summer, and everything looked very small."

IF YOU GO

What: "Exponential: 4 Huge Paintings," works ranging from 11 feet in diameter to 9 feet by 30 feet, by Michael Knutson and Whitney Nye of Portland, Jeffrey Simmons of Seattle and Philip Krohn of Oakland, Calif.

Where: Art Gym, Marylhurst University

When: The exhibit runs Sunday to Feb. 15; hours are from noon to 4 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays.

Also: A reception with the artists will be from 3 to 5 p.m. Sunday, and a conversation with the artists will be from noon to 1:30 p.m. Jan. 29, also at the Art Gym.

Admission: Free

Information: 503-699-6242