

out of the white cube

by Kimberly Chapman

Looking for more opportunities to show your work? Try targeting venues that align with or speak to your work's narrative.

It started with an obsession about the reasons women were sent to mental asylums and the botched diagnoses and treatments they endured. After two years of research and making porcelain sculptures to tell the story, the series, titled *Eighty-Six Reasons For Asylum Admission*, debuted last year at Baldwin Wallace University's Fawick Gallery in Berea, Ohio. Since then, pieces have been curated into group museum and gallery shows, but the goal remains to show the collection in its entirety. The question was how could I achieve this? Then it hit me—what if I could find places whose very bricks-and-mortar spoke directly to the work's narrative while generating new audiences at the same time.

Here's how my plan unfolded.

Digging Deep

I started by researching topics relating to American asylums, including mental illness and psychology—specifically pinpointing specialty museums, historical centers, and higher education institutions with an affinity for psychology, women's studies, and feminist programs.

In my online searches, I quickly landed on the former Athens Lunatic Asylum in Athens, Ohio. Built in 1868, this sprawling institution served thousands of patients from 1874 to 1993. Today it is a mixed-use development renamed The Ridges, which is under the auspices of Ohio University. The asylum's administrative building was refurbished and is now the beautiful Kennedy Museum of Art. The last remaining milk farm on the asylum's property was repurposed into The Dairy Barn Arts Center. Not far from both institutions is the The Southeast Ohio History Center, which counts Athens Asylum artifacts among its collections.

I combed each institution's website for mission statements, goals, and objectives. I identified the decision makers, studied past exhibitions, and scanned their social-media outlets.

Making Contact

With an email subject line that read: "Eighty-Six Reasons Why This Exhibition is Perfect for You," I composed introductory emails requesting meeting dates. I made it abundantly clear this was a scouting



1 Chapman's *You're Really Lovely Underneath It All* installation, Kennedy Museum of Art. 2 Artist outside of the Kennedy Museum of Art, which once served as the Athens Lunatic Asylum administration building.



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3 Dairy Barn Arts Center exterior. 4 Chapman's exhibition installation in progress at The Dairy Barn. 5 The Dairy Barn's *Bird Ladies* installation.

expedition for my exhibition. I stressed it was a teaching collection and that I'd be available for gallery talks, lectures, and panel discussions. I attached my proposal, brochure, artist statement, resume, and a short video. I listed my website and social-media information and included published articles highlighting my work. With due diligence, appointments were secured.

Presentation Materials

For the interviews, I packed a few small porcelain sculptures and a stack of leave-behind work images. I also included an object list, a requirement booklet for pedestal and wall space, sketches of suggested exhibition layouts and, of course, business cards. I offered to write and distribute approved news releases, contact the media, and partake in interviews. I would also share my *Eighty-Six Reasons Think* book—a compilation of the thinking behind the collection—origin, research, imagery, inspiration, ideas, and insights. The takeaway would be that this is a well-organized, self-contained show.

Face-to-Face

My first success was at The Dairy Barn Arts Center, where I met with the exhibitions director. This impressive structure once provided the Asylum with their daily milk and meat supply and also served as work therapy for male patients. We agreed my sculptures

and images would best show in the Chaddock & Marrow Gallery. The exhibition featuring *Eighty-Six Reasons*, would run congruently with the "Contemporary Quilt" show in spring 2022, and we'd share opening/closing and reception dates.

Next I traveled to the Southeast Ohio History Center, where I met with the executive director and curator of collections. Built over a century ago, this massive brick building (once a church) has a collection of 70,000 object artifacts and 100,000 photographs. The immense, two-story exhibition space was appropriately named The Great Room, and included upper-deck, theater-style seating; a two-story pipe organ; and several glass exhibition cases. It is here that *Eighty-Six Reasons* will be featured.

Counted among the Athens Asylum artifacts were: Dr. Walter Freedman's personally engraved lobotomy pick, an assortment of dining room cutlery, a nurse's uniform, a doctor's medical bag, an electroshock therapy machine, patient artwork and letters, and an extensive photo collection. And, yes, it could be shown synchronously with my work. The show would directly follow the Dairy Barn exhibition and include an opening talk and reception.

An Added Bonus

As a show teaser, my sculpture, *You're Really Lovely Underneath It All*, and a tintype enlargement (me depicted as an asylum patient)



6 A medicine bag from Southeast Ohio History Center's collections is photographed with Chapman's *Escapist Amy*. 7 Chapman's *Losing My Thirst for Living* teacups are paired with Athens Lunatic Asylum cutlery. 8 Chapman's *Gold Masked Women* are the poster children for the *Eighty-Six Reasons for Asylum Admission* exhibition.

was visibly installed at the Kennedy Museum of Art's lobby among their pictorial images of the Asylum in its heyday. The purpose was to alert their visitors to the two upcoming *Eighty-Six Reasons* shows. Also included is a wall placard with exhibition details and show brochures.

Moving On

Using similar tactics, I contacted the Drs. Nicholas and Dorothy Cummings Center for the History of Psychology at The University of Akron. Their National Museum of Psychology features a section on early institutional history and includes on display an early straightjacket, Utica adult-restraint crib and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) machine.

Working with the curator and assistant director, we agreed that the newly renovated, two-story, light-filled atrium space in their Institute for Human Science and Culture (two floors above the museum) would house *Eighty-Six Reasons* for four months in 2023. There, I will join a panel discussion with local area asylum history experts followed by a public reception. The museum is also planning a companion pop-up exhibit to display additional institutional artifacts and archival records related to *Eighty-Six Reasons* topics.

Eager to form as many educational partnerships as possible, I met with the University of Akron Galleries Director. He offered a tan-

genial exhibition at the Myers School of Art's Emily Davis Gallery. This show will compliment the Cummings exhibition and cater to the University's Women's Studies and Ceramic Arts programs. It will include a gallery talk and incorporate new student artwork based on the show's theme.

What's Next

With a little success in my back pocket, I'll continue to similarly market the asylum work and other recent collections I've made. I'll investigate maritime museums for my *Ghost Ships* and *Star Gazer* groupings and search for museums that are housed in one-time public schools for my *Active Shooter* series. Most importantly, I'll continue to make new work, keeping in mind that thinking outside the box can lead to a plethora of new exhibition and public-viewing opportunities.

the author *Kimberly Chapman professionally marketed corporations and colleges for three decades before pursuing a BFA in ceramics at the Cleveland Institute of Art. Since her 2017 graduation she has been curated into more than 50 museum and gallery shows and has had several solo exhibitions that included lecturing and teaching components. She focuses on telling the story of what women endure. To learn more, visit kimberlychapmansculptor.com.*