

Times Living

CITY CREATIVES

Cosmic warrior

Young Torpedo Factory artist Alexis Gomez explores virtual reality

BY CODY MELLO-KLEIN

Alexis Gomez' studio at the Torpedo Factory is remarkably barebones.

There are a few faceless wood and plastic life-sized figures, one that looks like it's walking out of the wall and another splayed out on Gomez' desk, but the walls and floors of the studio space are almost completely empty.

The stark simplicity of the studio slips away, however, as soon as you strap into a virtual reality headset and dive into an early version of one of Gomez' projects.

The empty studio is replaced by a psychedelic backdrop. Faceless figures – similar to the ones that sit in Gomez' studio – stand in a circle as silver orbs bounce in and out of sight, all set to the atmospheric strains of a sample taken from hip hop artist Kid Cudi.

We're not in Kansas anymore.

As one of the youngest artists at the Torpedo Factory, Gomez, 25, is using his short-term residency to explore the increasingly per-

meable boundaries between physical and digital worlds. Using augmented and virtual reality, he layers digital elements onto physical sculptures to inspire critical thinking about technology and its role in modern life.

"If I [were] to give you my elevator pitch in one sentence it would be: My work investigates the internal and external spaces we inhabit as human beings," Gomez said. "Internal dealing with the mind, external dealing with our body and its environment. There's a whole digital plane that I'm referencing as an internal awareness, and then, when it becomes physical or sculptural, it becomes really tangible. I like where those two lines overlap."

Born in Fairfax and raised in Woodbridge, Gomez found art at a young age. Painting and drawing were some of the only things he was good at in school, Gomez said. When it came time to think seriously about a path after high school, it seemed like the only option, he said.

He devoted all his free time to painting and, despite having very little education in religion, found himself drawn



PHOTO/CODY MELLO-KLEIN

Alexis Gomez in his Torpedo Factory studio. A Kid Cudi poster, his "studio assistant," hangs over his desk.

to religious iconography.

"Demons and angels and stuff like that," Gomez said. "... I was never really a religious kid. I was never forced to go to church. Something about those narratives struck a chord."

Between religious imagery, lessons taken from art history and his use of oil painting and ceramics, Gomez' work was fairly traditional when he entered the

Corcoran School of Art and Design at George Washington University in 2012.

But it wasn't long before Gomez found himself exploring new, sometimes uncomfortable, artistic territory, he said. After a professor introduced him to a program called Cinema 4D, there was no going back.

"Essentially he looked at my paintings and was like, 'You could do all of this in

the software with the click of a button, so I just have to show you," Gomez said. "He showed me and then I went down a rabbit hole really. Then all my work took a digital turn."

Gomez replaced the life-sized clay figures of his early college work with 3D scanned and laser printed versions of his own body.

SEE ALEXIS GOMEZ | 20

HOMES

Holiday entertaining

Impress guests with an on-trend tablescape this holiday season | Page 22

HEALTH

Life Well Lived

Corporations are revolutionizing employee health and well-being | Page 24

CALENDAR

November events

Shop till you drop at Alexandria's Plaid Friday and Small Business Saturday | Page 25

CITY CREATIVES: ALEXIS GOMEZ



PHOTO/CODY MELLO-KLEIN



PHOTO/CODY MELLO-KLEIN



PHOTO/ALEXIS GOMEZ

Top left: A painting in Gomez' studio.

Top right: Gomez' figures are 3D scanned and digitally rendered versions of his own body.

Bottom: "Prometheus," one of Gomez' AR installations.

ALEXIS GOMEZ FROM | 19

He created the figures, which appear throughout his work, by 3D scanning his body, breaking the scan down into layers using separate software, laser cutting the scan out of acrylic and then reassembling the separate layers into a life-sized figure.

They may be scans of his body, but Gomez resists the urge to use them as a form of self-portraiture, he said. Filtered through countless software programs, the smooth bodies and featureless faces became a generic vessel for Gomez' work.

"Even though I know that I'm working from my own body, my identity isn't important in it," Gomez said. "I'd rather let that dissipate within the process and let that just exist as a being. ... It's more about human experience than just my experience."

At this point, his work remained solely in the physical world. His senior thesis project, "Room of Consciousness," featured these digitally rendered figures hunched over, hands over their faces as if crying, in a dimly lit,

blue vinyl-walled room.

Throughout his time at G.W., Gomez continued to experiment with Cinema 4D and add more software to his digital palette. Eventually, through YouTube tutorials and hard work, he learned how to create augmented reality experiences that could be integrated with his sculpture work.

Unlike virtual reality, augmented reality does not take the user into another world entirely. Instead, like the gaming phenomenon "Pokemon Go," augmented reality layers digital experiences onto the real world, usually by using smart phones as a portal.

The technology is still both a gift and challenge for Gomez, since there is a learning curve with software like Cinema 4D, Gomez admitted.

The technical challenge has made Gomez' work more collaborative. His process is built on the kind of open source sharing and collaboration defined by the modern internet era. When he doesn't know something, there are YouTube tutorials. When he needs a specific visual asset, someone has probably offered

it up for free online.

"I think it lends itself to collaboration more than anything. Whereas if I'm doing the sculptures or doing the paintings, it's a super isolated experience," Gomez said.

Despite the technical challenges, Gomez' digital medium provides almost boundless creative potential.

"If there are any limitations with it, it's me for now," Gomez said. "Until I learn more, I can't really say there's limitations on the technology. I don't think there are because it's only getting better."

Like most of his work, Gomez' early AR projects were heavily inspired by the visual design and mystery of science fiction films like "Alien" and "Arrival."

"Cosmic Warrior," a collaborative project Gomez did with interactive art space Arthouse in 2018, was a "wormhole activation" that took a public space and transformed it into a short science fiction scene.

Gomez positioned one of his life-sized figures to appear as though it was emerg-

CITY CREATIVES: ALEXIS GOMEZ



PHOTO/ALEXIS GOMEZ

“Room of Consciousness” was Alexis Gomez’ senior thesis project, featuring one of his paintings and a 3D scanned figure in a vinyl walled room.



PHOTO/CODY MELLO-KLEIN

Gomez was first exposed to 3D scanning and the software Cinema 4D during his time at George Washington University.

ALEXIS GOMEZ FROM | 20

ing out of a portal in the wall. Pointing a phone up to the sculpture activated the installation, which animated a similar figure that walks out of a digitally rendered portal on the opposite wall.

“Prometheus,” a similar AR installation, featured a black 3D scanned and laser cut figure shouldering a flat slab with the words “Since birth it was prophecy” printed on it. Similar to “Cosmic Warrior,” the words activated a scene of sci-fi spirituality with a circle of faceless figures positioned in different poses.

The words are lyrics from a Kid Cudi song, as the genre-bending artist has been one of Gomez’ major

sources of inspiration.

“It’s molded so much of my work, if not all of it really,” Gomez said. “I guess it’s just his whole message. He has this kind of space narrative that I’m drawn to as well, this intergalactic being and higher power kind of stuff.”

Gomez has named several installations, including “Cosmic Warrior,” after Kid Cudi’s work. Gomez even hung a comic book-style Kid Cudi poster on the wall, referring to it as his “studio assistant.”

Kid Cudi has been a common creative thread through Gomez’ art since high school, and the musician continues to inspire his work at the Torpedo Factory.

After several showings at the art center and a post-grad-

uate residency, Gomez secured a series of short-term residencies earlier this year. The Torpedo Factory has given him steady studio space, a precious commodity in the art world, and a network of fellow creatives, Gomez said.

Gomez’ Torpedo Factory experience hasn’t been without its fair share of tension, he said. His work stands in stark contrast to the more traditional work of veteran artists in the space, and the recent history of conflict between artists and the city has made some artists wary of change.

“I’ve never really felt too welcomed by the other artists. More questioned,” Gomez said. “... Torpedo Factory has been in such flux of where it’s going and a lot of the art-

ists have been here since it opened, so they take a lot of pride in the Factory and that they’ve been with it all along. Any changes they’re kind of wary about. I know my role. I’m the new guy and I try to not step on any toes.”

Gomez’ work is, in the most literal sense, meant to take people on a trip. He intends for his AR projects to call attention to the ways people use their phones, not just in art galleries but in the world, Gomez said. In the Instagram era, most people’s worlds are already filtered through a screen.

Getting people to think critically about technology is a challenging proposition, Gomez said, especially when AR and VR are still new to people.

“Once people get past that ‘This looks pretty cool’ and start realizing what they’re doing – they’re looking at their phone, they’re looking at where they’re moving in this digital space – I want to highlight that a bit more and let the spectacle dissolve,” Gomez said.

Challenging people to question technology and interrogate the ways in which they use it on a daily basis can be exciting and a little dangerous, Gomez said. Once you start questioning things, where do you stop?

“I go down that rabbit hole all the time. I live in that rabbit hole, so it’s just trying to get people to come down it with me,” Gomez said.

-cmelloklein@alextimes.com

Times Living

CITY CREATIVES

Life and death

Torpedo Factory artist explores beauty, death, the natural world in wood engraving

BY CODY MELLO-KLEIN

Art has never come easy to Rosemary Covey.

The long-time wood engraver and painter has spent the last 40 years at the Torpedo Factory with collections of her work on display around the world, yet the process of making her work hasn't gotten easier. The challenge – the fear, “the edge,” in Covey's words – is intrinsic to her work.

“You kind of have to skate this edge between being very uncomfortable and yet still being able to have the skills and be conscious yet almost unconscious at the same time,” Covey said. “As soon as you relax, the thing starts to not work. It can work, but it won't have life to it.”

Given Covey's preoccupation with death, fragility and the darker side of the natural world, the sentiment might seem at odds with her work, but her wood engravings and paintings come to life precisely because of that tension.

“My work has that duality to some extent,” Covey said. “It used to be what

people always considered very dark with themes connecting to medicine and death and fragility. But out of that came a series of work that surprisingly had great, larger appeal.”

Covey was born in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1954, a time of intense social and political upheaval. She left the country at age 10 with her family because her father had been invited to pursue a Ph.D. in the U.S.

Covey's formative memories of South Africa are still tinged with nostalgia – the memories of a child unaware of the time in which she was growing up, happy in the self-contained world of her family.

It's also a nostalgia for the early days of her artistic curiosity. At five years old, Covey was expressing an interest in creative expression both in class and at home, where she worked on crafts with her grandmother.

“She had big boxes of scraps and we made things together all the time, so leaving South Africa was hard for me because she and I spent all our time together,” Covey said. “She was the biggest influence on my life ever.”

Covey and her family end-



COURTESY PHOTO

Rosemary Covey came to the Torpedo Factory at age 22 and has remained an artist at the art center for more than 40 years.

ed up moving to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where her father finished his Ph.D. at the University of Michigan. The family then moved to Ashfield, Massachusetts, where Covey's father had secured a

position at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

In Ashfield, Covey's passion for the arts continued to blossom. An art teacher at Williston Northampton School introduced her to

print engraving at the age of 14; Covey returned years later, after college, to learn wood engraving from the same teacher.

SEE **COVEY**

| 28

SENIORS

At Home in Alexandria

Nonprofit "villages" around the country assist seniors in need. | Page 30

CALENDAR

December events

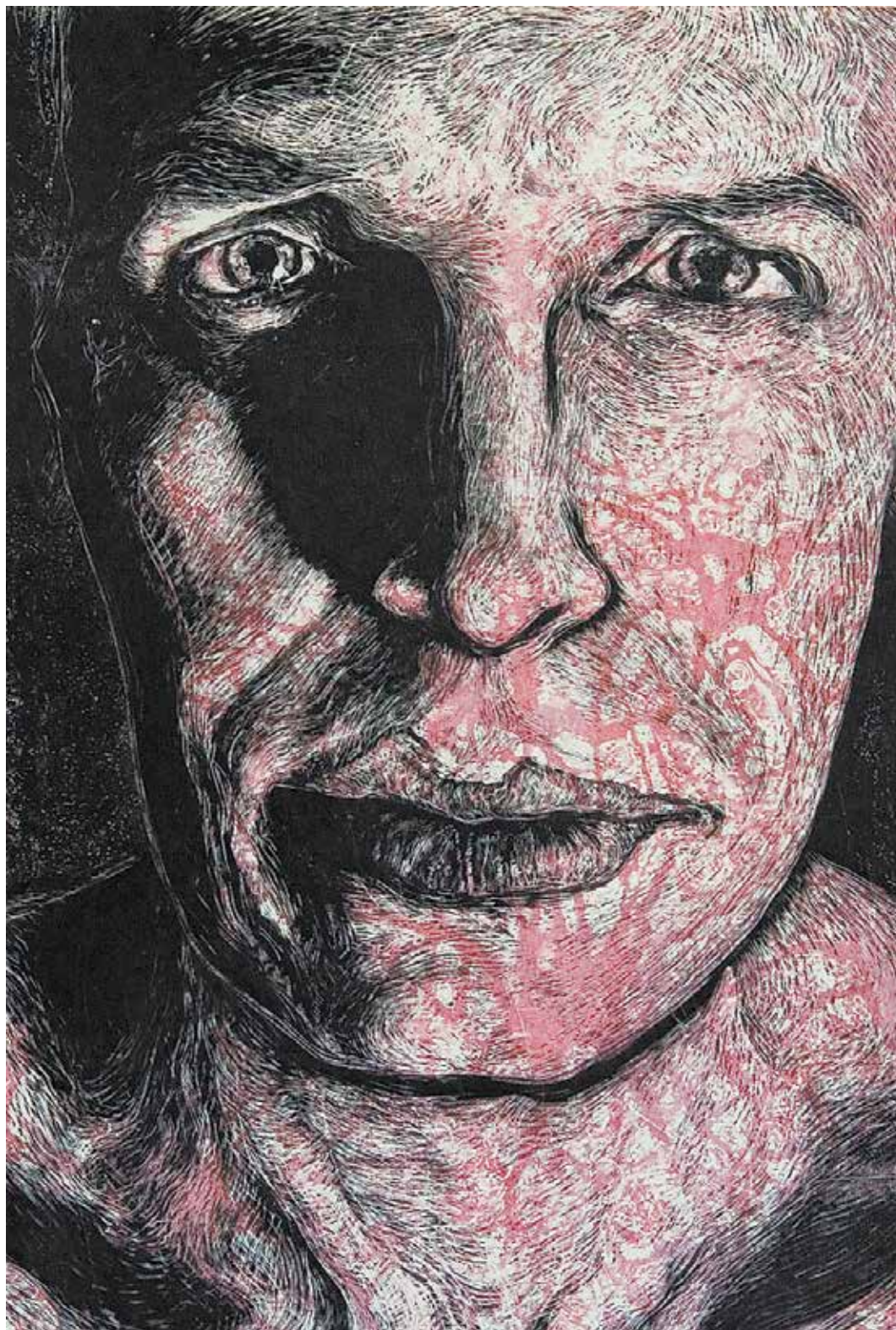
Visit Mount Vernon, attend an art exhibit, catch a holiday show and more. | Page 31

HOMEIES

Deck your halls

From traditional displays to adventurous color palettes, holiday decor themes are endless. | Page 32

CITY CREATIVES: ROSEMARY COVEY



COURTESY PHOTO

"David with Astrocytes (Brain Tumor 8)" was part of a three-year project, during which Rosemary Covey depicted a man suffering from a brain tumor at various stages in the process.

COVEY

FROM | 27

Covey was set on the path. She knew she wanted to make art, but, like many artists, she found barriers at every turn. Her parents warned her about the scary,

impractical path of an artist. Collectors and artists openly questioned her ability at portfolio showings.

The cynics only strengthened Covey's determination. Covey's early career was defined by finding a way

around the blockades that were thrown up around her, she said.

Covey's parents refused to pay for her college education, so she left Cornell University after two years. At 18 years old, she married a man who

“You can't make a mistake and if you do, you have to incorporate it, which really creates that panic, nervous energy that I think propels work.”

— Rosemary Covey

helped support her artistic ambitions, but after divorcing at 21, Covey found herself in need of a way to support herself financially.

“Then I'm on my own at 22 and I have to make a living,” Covey said. “My parents were like, ‘Now you're on your own.’ So, coming [to Alexandria] I started doing commissions and slowly it became my career and way of making a living.”

Covey immediately fell in love with Alexandria. The history and character of the city were captivating, and the detail of the streets was like catnip for a wood engraver, Covey said.

Wood engraving, at its most fundamental, involves carving an image into a block of wood, applying ink to the face of the block and pressing the ink onto a surface to leave an impression.

It's a process that is easy to learn but difficult to master, partially because of the intense concentration it requires, Covey said.

“You can't make a mistake and if you do, you have to incorporate it, which really creates that panic, nervous energy that I think propels work,” Covey said.

Prints created through wood engraving also need to be designed in reverse, since the print will be ultimately be a reverse image of the original design. The reverse engineering makes executing facial expressions difficult for many engravers, but Covey said her dyslexia helps.

“I have extreme dyslexia. I have problems with all kinds of simple tasks, but the

reversing of things comes more naturally [to me] than it might [to others],” Covey said. “It's very difficult to do facial expression and ... to get a likeness of any sort when you reverse it, but it helps to have dyslexia.”

Covey came to the Torpedo Factory in 1976, two years after it opened as an arts center. Although she can trace thematic patterns in her work all the way back to those early days, her work has evolved creatively and procedurally.

Death and fragility are still at the core of her work, but Covey has started to find new ways to explore themes that have captivated artists for centuries.

In collaboration with botanists, evolutionary biologists and entomologists, Covey now finds new inspiration in the natural world, the duality of decaying lifeforms and life under the microscope.

Her series called “Insects” came out of a residency at Blue Mountain Center in the Adirondacks. Combining printing and painting, Covey depicted the bodies of butterflies and dragonflies as beaten and bruised yet beautiful.

“[One entomologist] said, as a scientist, you see them under the microscope and they're battered and beaten and their wings and their short life are scratched,” Covey said. “They're not pristine. And what I had been noticing was that, as they lie dead, they strike these human poses.”

Another series of prints and paintings focused on

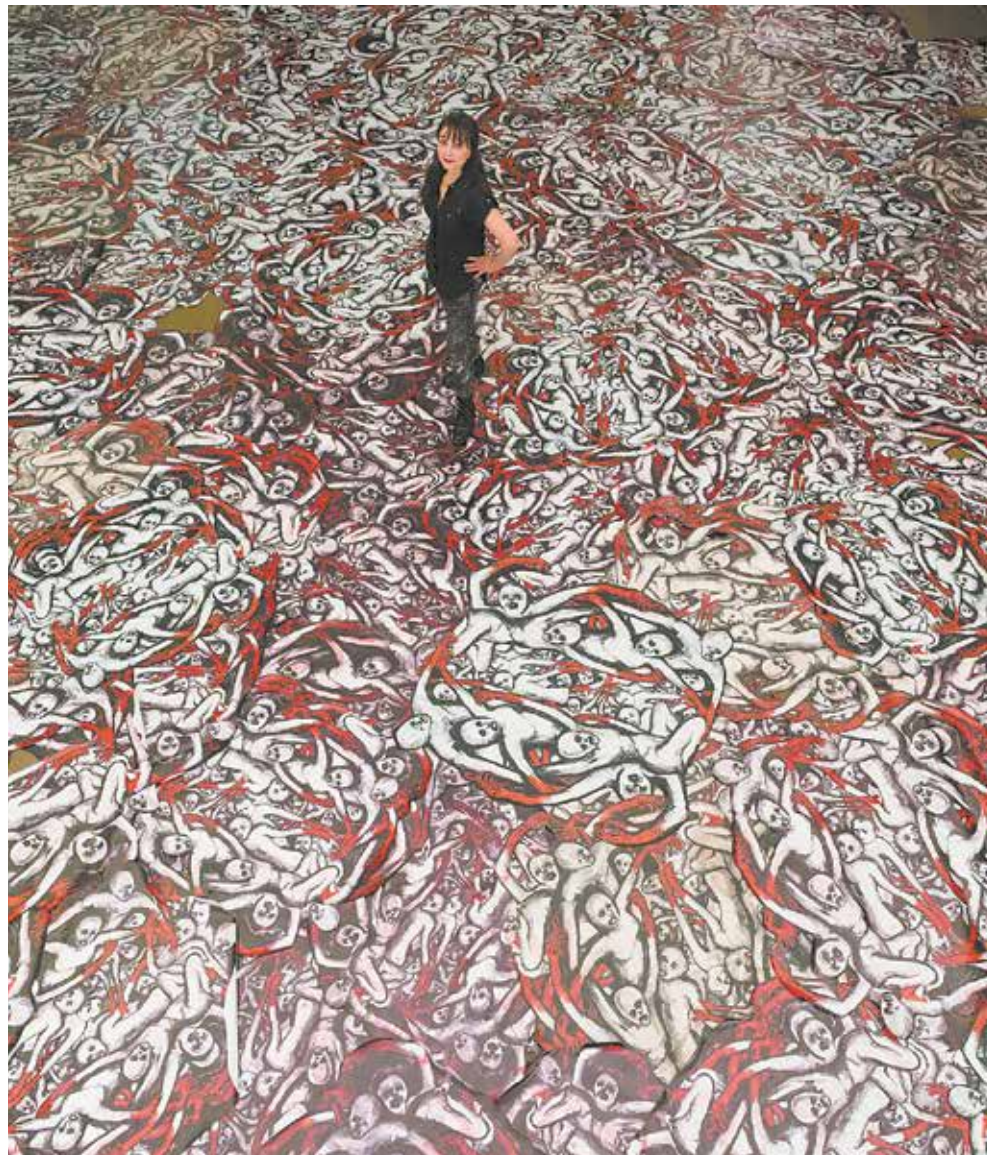
SEE COVEY

| 29

CITY CREATIVES: ROSEMARY COVEY



Left: Covey's mixed print and painting series "Insects" was inspired by her collaboration with an entomologist.



COURTESY PHOTOS

Right: "Red Handed" is a floor-sized piece meant to explore collective and personal grief. It has been displayed at the Torpedo Factory, Morton Fine Art Gallery in D.C. and Evergreen Museum in Baltimore.

COVEY

FROM | 28

fungi and lichens and the above ground beauty that masks monumental, monstrous rooted webs just below the surface, Covey said.

"I don't do it, when I work with a scientist, to be an illustrator or scientific illustrator," Covey said. "[I'm] not interested in that at all. I'm interested in what they can tell me that sparks my visual imagination."

Covey's science-inspired and research-driven work hasn't been limited to just insects and mushrooms.

"David with Astrocytes

(Brain Tumor 8)" was part of an intimate series of portraits that captured the eponymous David, a man Covey had met at her Torpedo Factory studio, in various stages of treatment for a brain tumor.

"He looked really haunted. ... He'd had all this surgery and you could sort of see what happened behind his eyes, that something monumental had happened," Covey said. "He hired me [and] I ended up working for him for three years to do a piece on his brain tumor experience."

Collaboration has become

an integral part of Covey's process, whether it's incorporating a partner's scientific knowledge or pieces from fellow artists.

"The best thing in the world is to find other people that are crazy about what they're doing and that fits with what you're doing," Covey said.

Her process has changed even as she uses the same tools. Covey said she's still driven by the same unknowable passion to create that drove her when she was alone at 22.

"It's the same exact thing and I still don't know

“ You get the idea in your head and then you have to push it. And you're hoping that you're gonna push it and it's going to be better than anything you ever did before.”

— Rosemary Covey

quite what it is," Covey said. "You get the idea in your head and then you have to push it. And you're hoping that you're gonna push it and it's going to be better than anything you ever did before. ... Once I've done it, I'm not even con-

cerned anymore. It's getting it there."

For Covey, the elusive "there" is a place she can't stop working toward.

"That's the goal," Covey said. "You hopefully never stop."

—cmelloklein@alextimes.com