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The Bag Lady

Rosemary Williams has turned shopping at the Mall of America into art -- and a statement about our consumer culture.

By [Sara Glassman](#), Star Tribune

Every day, thousands of tourists and locals flock to the third-largest mall in the country -- the Mall of America in Bloomington, where 12,500 parking spots, a store that sells only magnets, two Victoria's Secret stores and a roller coaster are just a few of the highlights.

When artist Rosemary Williams moved to Minnesota from New York to teach new media at St. Cloud State, she visited the mall, too. And she had a strong reaction.

"Even though I was overwhelmed, it fascinated me," she said.

It also inspired her to collect shopping bags from more than 300 stores and display them on an 8- by 20-foot wood structure she dubbed "The Wall of Mall." The piece was exhibited at the DUMBO Arts Center in New York last summer and the Fieldgate Gallery in London in January.

To go with this monumental sculpture, she is chronicling her ongoing treks to the MOA in a 27-episode "confessional" podcast titled "Rosemary Goes to the Mall." She releases new adventures biweekly on her website and is up to episode No. 21.

Through these works, Williams says, she uses her shopping experiences to offer a broader examination of our culture's consumerism.

Not that debating whether to buy a pair of brown satin heels at DSW Shoe Warehouse, enjoying a trip to the Oxygen Bar or picking up candy cigarettes is exactly a scalding putdown of the urge to shop.

"I'm critiquing it, but not in a supercritical way," she said.

'What's your return policy?'

Williams, 36, is from Virginia. She found the MOA soon after she and her husband, writer Keith Hollihan, and their two boys moved to St. Paul. It was the summer of 2005, not long after she received an MFA from Hunter College in New York.

It was raining the day that the couple closed on their new house, and they needed someplace to take the kids. "So I had the genius idea of coming to the Mall of America," she said.

Coming from the nearly mall-less urban density of New York City, it was a shock. "The din was so loud from the roller coasters and the people walking around. There's an echo in here."

But she couldn't stay away. In early 2006, she came up with the idea for "The Wall of Mall." She planned to ask for a bag from each store, figuring it would

take four or five trips.

But it wasn't that simple. Some stores refused her request.

Getting desperate, she told her first lie at Eddie Bauer. "I was like, 'I need a bag, out there, in the hallway.' I implied that there was an accident and my bag had ripped. The employees were standing in front of stacks of bags, but they couldn't decide whether to give me one." A manager finally handed her a precious bag, but the negotiations were taxing.

"The path of least resistance was to start shopping and returning," she said.

Over two months, starting in May 2006, Williams methodically shopped through each wing, buying an expensive GPS system from Radio Shack, Prada sunglasses that prompted an alter ego, and a gold lamé gym bag from One Thousand Steps. Then she returned them.

She kept a few souvenirs, including: lime-green Gravis sneakers from Journeys, a necklace made of antique Chinese porcelain from Local Charm, a bag of dark chocolate truffles from Lindt and toys for her kids.

Listen to her podcast journals and you may get drawn into the ups and downs of Williams' saga. She takes her choices in each store extremely seriously, even when she plans to return what she buys.

Sometimes she adopts themes, buying only handbags one day, and only useful items on another.

That's when she found out that "there's no place here to get toothpaste or a spiral notebook or a pen," she said.

She often concocted elaborate stories, especially in jewelry stores, where merchandise is expensive and there are often no-return policies. (She ended up buying, and keeping, a lot of silver polish.)

Scenes from a mall

On a trip through the mall with Williams, you can see that she really knows her way around.

"I could rent myself out at the front door," she said.

Although she finished her official shopping trips last summer, she still returns for jeans (at Lucky Brand Jeans), to take her kids to the Lego store, and to get computer help at the Apple Store.

Her series of sprees has shifted her comfort level with shopping, she said: "I always have had a tremendous amount of anxiety and guilt over spending money on things. It kept me from getting things I needed. Now, I didn't become this mad consumer, but if you need a pair of jeans, then go out and buy a pair that fit and you're going to like," she said.

Now that mall trips aren't her job, Williams can reminisce about every store from Acorn to Zumiez. On our trip, she lamented the closing of the Thomas Kinkadee Gallery and the disappearance of the fortunetelling machine.

The black leather purse with frayed strings hanging at her side indicated that she didn't keep any of the handbags she pretend-picked for herself.

Williams won't publicly state the real grand total of her expenses. Doing math

based on her accounting through her 20th trip, she had rung up purchases of \$1,753, with seven trips left to go.

She used the same credit card for all of the transactions, which went unnoticed by her credit-card company. "I thought they would get in touch with me at some point and say, 'There's some really strange activity on your card,' but no one ever did. That led me to believe that it didn't seem that strange."

So what can be gleaned by exploring every nook of the MOA's 2.77 million square feet-on foot or vicariously?

"There's a lot of focus on materialism in our society. My quest was an exaggerated focus on that kind of consumerism. It's interesting to people because I have my own engagement with consumerism -- looking good and having nice objects in my house. It's not alienating. It's more like commiseration."

So far, no area gallery or museum has asked Williams to re-create her "Wall of Mall" in the Twin Cities. But if they do, she's ready: She still has all the bags in a cardboard box in her studio.

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