

## Smithsonian exhibit gets 'interactive' with linoleum Armstrong's Marmorette, Colorette lines are artworks centerpiece

By Eva Marienchild

Juan Munoz knew an intriguing floor surface when he saw one. He was, after all — until his death this year at the age of 48 — a Spanish sculptor who drew visitors to his exhibits with works that transformed entire rooms into stages that viewers often shared with somber figurines. It's only fitting that, among the works of his last exhibit, he turned nearly 2,000 square feet of custom-designed Armstrong linoleum into two interactive works featured at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., earlier this year.

The first Munoz installment, *The Wasteland*, inspired by the T.S. Eliot poem of the same name, required the cutting of 6,000 individual pieces — 2,000 each from Armstrong's Uni Walton line — in beige, zinc and black. Inspired by centuries-old Baroque *trompe l'oeil* designs (which translates as "to play tricks on the eyes"), it features a three-dimensional-like pattern that has visitors stooping down to verify that the undulating effect of the linoleum "stage" is only in the eyes of the beholder. Off to the side, a bronze ventriloquist's dummy sits on a ledge, seemingly eyeing the viewer.

Olga Viso, the Hirshhorn's curator of contemporary art, has observed patrons reassuring themselves the floor is flat. "The guards have told me viewers ask if they can walk on the surface," she said. This was precisely the artist's intent, she said. "For Munoz, the floor suggested the stage and the complex psychological relationship between the sculptural figure and the viewer, who, in this particular case, becomes the actor."

The finished *Wasteland* floor was deemed so distinctive that museum officials used it as the main graphic element in the signage promoting the exhibit. This is a fitting tribute to an artist whose use of linoleum induces visitors to cross its history-steeped stage.

The *Prompter*, the second exhibit, boasts a linoleum floor featuring a series of triangles arranged to resemble a quilt. Fashioned out of 600 pieces — compared to the mammoth proportions of *The Wasteland* — the entire art form is on a raised stage. Munoz used the classic marble chestnut brown from Armstrong's Marmorette line and golden creme from the Colorette line, which features brighter, more vibrant colors.

Faizi Syed, president of Flooring Solutions, which was tapped to install the flooring for the exhibit, recalls the unique challenges his installers faced over the two-day period it took to complete the installation. Four mechanics were required to install both floors: *The Wasteland* floor was cemented directly to the existing concrete floor, while the *Prompter* floor was cemented to a wooden sub floor that was raised to become the stage.

"We've successfully completed a number of projects similar to this," he said. "We installed a floor at the Washington Capitals' headquarters in the form of an ice skating rink and the ESPN logo at a local ESPN (Zone Restaurant, to name a few. (Both of these projects involved hundreds of pieces. The Hirshhorn project involved thousands of pieces, but because of our experience it was not as difficult as it may have been for others. It was like putting together a "massive jigsaw puzzle on the floor and making sure all the pieces stuck together."

The biggest benefit of the project, Syed said, is that architects and designers gain confidence in their own ideas, no matter how grand. "More than anything they should feel that if they can draw it we can do it," he said. "All it takes is the right combination of manufacturer, fabricator and installer." Flooring Solutions wasn't the only firm that played a key role in the Munoz project.

Waterjet Works!, the custom fabricator, used computer-driven waterjet cutting machinery to create the floor patterns.

Philip Einsohn, president, said the Munoz Project was something special. "To be associated with a person of that level of creativity was truly an honor," he said. "In our business we usually know what the end result will look like, but in this case we didn't. The result was far greater than we anticipated. In this exhibit you can stand at each corner of the room and get a different perspective. Watching the people coming to the exhibit is fascinating. As they approach the threshold they hesitate, but once they cross over they are in the artwork. They are used to being the observers but here they're part of it; I'm watching them so I'm part of it, too. I guess Munoz is having a good laugh that he was able to make people do that." Einsohn noted that all the pieces were cut from sheet goods, requiring 10 days to complete.

Sidney Lawrence, head of public affairs for the Hirshhorn, explained its exhibits always do "quite well" in light of the fact that business has been down 30 percent after the World Trade Center attacks. "Despite that, on a good weekend we get 4,000 people," he said. Speaking of the multi-work retrospective of which *The Wasteland* and *The Prompter* were part, he said, "It's nice to see this whole environment of contemporary flooring as part of art." He has noticed spectators "slow down and seem to feel transformed" when surveying Munoz's work. Kristen Hileman, public affairs associate at the Hirshhorn, comment that "such wonderful patterning slightly disorients" the viewers. The floor is so beautiful they have to adjust to being able to walk on it," she said. Lawrence agrees. "They seem to feel very elegant walking on the floor," he said. "It makes them feel special. People do understand there is an optical illusion; it's exactly as the artist intended. He's playing tricks on their eyes."

Munoz isn't the only artist who has incorporated linoleum in a body of work. Other notable artists, including Picasso, have taken their inspiration from linoleum. Over the years he produced countless linocuts using popular materials. **FCW**