

New Benton Exhibit Showcases “New Eyes on Horsebarn Hill”

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Of the many memorable outdoor spots at the University of Connecticut's Storrs campus, few are as popular and inviting as Horsebarn Hill. The landscape offers a scenic overlook of the campus, nearby ice cream at the Dairy Bar, easy access to the Fenton Tract forest area and farm animals galore.

Something less visible, however, is the abundance of history brimming within the area and how the hill has changed over time. But an ongoing exhibition at the William Benton Museum of Art, “Raid the Archive: New Eyes on Horsebarn Hill,” is making the hill’s past more apparent.

The exhibition showcases artwork by UConn MFA students inspired by Horsebarn Hill-related materials from the university’s Archives and Special Collections. The students also curated artifacts from the archives that were put on display alongside their artwork. According to the Benton’s website, the exhibition was made available to the public on Jan. 20.

Avery Nielsen-Webb, a second-semester MFA student who specializes in photography, was one of the students featured in the exhibition. He said the project was the result of a class led by art professor Janet Pritchard in the fall 2025 semester.

The class met once a week for three hours and included the entire cohort of five MFA students in their first semester and two MFA students in their third semester, Nielsen-Webb said. The process of poring through the archives to find information about Horsebarn Hill took a lot of time, but since his practice focuses on where research and environmentalism intersect art, Nielsen-Webb said the project worked with his artistic interests.

“I felt very comfortable doing this project,” Nielsen-Webb said. “I know for some people it’s more of, like, an artistic project, but for me it was more of bringing history into art with a little bit of science.”

Nielsen-Webb’s piece is one of the first on display upon entering the exhibition. At first, it may just look like a large, gray tapestry with a series of numbers filling the space. But it is actually the written out values of each colored pixel of an archival picture. In the photo, Albert E. Moss, who taught at UConn in the early 1900s, is adding a dam to the Fenton River, Nielsen-Webb said.

“Archivists are like, ‘You can’t steal any of these items or they’re going to get copyrighted,’ and I was like, ‘Watch me,’” Nielsen-Webb said. “So basically, I did steal it pixel by pixel but I completely reinvented it.”

Nielsen-Webb said he took into account the photo’s original context and wanted to make parallels between dams and archives that “some people can access, some people can’t access.” He also said he was “relating code and data to more of a flow, kind of like a river.”

The artwork component was a helpful stepping stone for other projects in progress about forests that use data centers, Nielsen-Webb said. For his curated archival materials, which each student had their own section for, with a description they wrote, he selected photos of work being done to the Fenton River.

On an adjacent wall in the exhibit, a very different scene plays out with the archival materials. Photos of students posing with cows sit on the wall while glass milk bottles, a UConn Dairy Club T-shirt and other cow-related memorabilia rest in a glass case. Second-semester MFA student Alex Heard, who focuses on sculpture, curated the cow-related materials, called

their area the “cow corner.”

“It was like as many things as I could find with cows on them that felt kind of both aesthetically and conceptually consistent with the word, just pile it in,” Heard said. “The idea of the show being a ‘raid the archive’ situation where we’re more or less open to take as much or as little from the archive and present it in this kind of new context was pretty exciting because you could kind of just keep going.”

Heard, who lived in Ohio before coming to UConn, said they were not familiar with Horsebarn Hill before the project. They said that when they familiarized themselves with the hill before the archival research process, the cows and other organisms were captivating.

“The things that I latched onto the most was that sort of decision to seek out magic that was surrounding us if we so chose to and sort of zeroing in on that resolution of fauna,” Heard said. “And then the kind of greater landscape of the like hill, thinking about the sky, the ground and then everything that happens between those things.”

Heard’s piece, titled “Landscape with Cow,” explores this idea in the form of a vertical sculpture with three main parts. At the bottom is a mound of soft materials in the shape of many four-leaf clovers. Above it is a black-and-white cow print pattern, and even higher is a blue and white cow print pattern that represents the sky. Heard connected all three components with a stick they found on the hill.

“It is meant to be sort of referencing the idea of an abstract painting crossed with a landscape painting in the form of a sculpture,” Heard said. “So it’s sort of like a sign post, a map, a protest sign, all coalescing in art that looks like a cow.”

Heard said they were inspired by archival newspapers, some

of which are on display, that covered protests in 1999 against plans to construct a Pfizer research facility on Horsebarn Hill.

The other second-semester MFA students had different approaches to their art. McKayla Bensheimer made an Indigenous American-inspired quilt, while Kate Greenwell created two stacks of handmade paper — one with the word “here,” the other with the word, “there” — that could be taken by visitors. Bahar Ejtemaei made a series of black-and-white acrylic paintings depicting sustained life when the Farwell House, which used to be near the Jacobson Barn, burned down in 1976.

Shuning Wang, one of the second-year MFA students featured in the exhibition, said she went into the project with an already-established appreciation for Horsebarn Hill.

“In this project, I was inspired by just standing on the top of the hill, feeling the wind and thinking back into the archival materials we’d read,” Wang said. “And it inspired me, feels like a story is flipping the book pages itself within the wind.”

Wang captured the movement of the wind by photographing a piece of paper held in the air while at the top of the hill. She then made her own paper — something she said she enjoys because of how paper’s flexibility and fragility relate to human beings — that mimicked the pattern. Old newspapers were used to make the paper material, Wang said, and some cutouts were visible in her project.

“While making the process, I also reprint some of the archival material and have it half-shown on the paper,” Wang said. “So the paper pop on that gives me a layer of time that I’m feeling during this project.”

Rosely Htoo, the other second-year MFA student in the exhibition, said the program was a helpful opportunity to

combine her interests in photography, maps and making books.

“I was looking at a lot of [maps] and then someone was telling me about the topography, and I was like, ‘I love that,’” Htoo said. “While doing the research I noticed the elevation changed throughout the years. I was like, this is interesting, that little change in the number.”

Htoo ended up making a book that sets the contour lines of the hill alongside photographs of fingerprint markings, which look similar next to each other. She said juxtaposing contour lines with fingerprint markings shows a shared sense of identity.

“We were talking about identity, right?” Htoo said. “Like how a landscape has an identity, but also how we are identified with that landscape. But then our fingerprint carries our identity, right? So it’s making that connection of identity within identity within identity.”

Htoo also said the program was the first time she practiced making wooden frames, which she used for the large topography maps on display.

The students said that despite working in different mediums, the project was collaborative, especially when they were looking through the archives. They also said they spent a lot of time coordinating with archivists and Benton curators to ensure the research and exhibition phases of the project went smoothly.

“This was a great opportunity for us as burgeoning professionals to interface with a venue like a museum where they’re going to handle the objects in a much more litigious way than any given pop-up gallery,” Heard said.

According to the Benton website, the exhibit will remain open until Aug. 2. The website also lists the Benton’s open hours and any upcoming events ran in conjunction with “Raid the Archive: New Eyes on Horsebarn Hill.”

‘Project Hail Mary:’ Have the Stars Aligned for this Adaptation?



The promotional poster for the highly anticipated Sci-fi movie, ‘Project Hail Mary.’ This film starring Ryan Gosling will be released on March 20, 2026. PHOTO COURTESY OF @IMTONAA ON INSTAGRAM.

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On March 20, 2026, the highly anticipated “Project Hail Mary” arrives in theaters. Directed by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller — known for past hits like “Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse,” “21 Jump Street” and “The LEGO Movie” — as well as featuring a reported \$248 million budget and star Ryan Gosling as its lead, the film is shaping up to potentially be one of the year’s biggest hits.

The movie itself is an adaptation of the 2021 novel of the same name by author Andy Weir, known primar-

ily for his novel “The Martian,” which received a film adaptation in 2015. Like “The Martian,” “Project Hail Mary” is a work of hard science fiction, featuring a narrative that attempts to remain as scientifically plausible as possible. Considering that, it might come as a surprise that “Project Hail Mary” is receiving such a high-budget adaptation. In today’s current pop culture landscape, hard sci-fi is an unpopular genre for mass audiences, even when it manages to have the occasional hit like “The Martian” or “The Expanse.” However, looking at the novel itself, it soon becomes clear why its film adaptation might be de-

serving of a dream budget and creative team.

For starters, “Project Hail Mary” is innovative in that it never wastes its reader’s time. The book opens with its protagonist waking up from a coma, fighting to remember his past life, only to soon realize that he is alone on a spaceship traveling far beyond Earth. From there, he must do his best to figure out who he is and what the significance of his current journey is. After this gripping introduction, the book continues along at a steady pace, alternating between flashbacks of the protagonist’s — whose name is soon revealed to be Ryland Grace — memories of Earth and the current day as he works toward figuring out his mission. This narrative structure does a fantastic job at keeping readers engaged, with Weir drip-feeding just enough information to keep the plot progressing steadily while preserving certain core mysteries as long as possible.

Moreover, Weir’s prose does an excellent job at keeping the story’s scientific elements palpable for readers. Written from the first-person perspective of Grace, the book shies away from dense descriptions and instead opts for maximum efficiency in storytelling. While some critics of Weir’s work dislike this approach — often citing it as coming across as amateurish — it is equally arguable that it is one of the book’s biggest strengths. Through his light prose, Weir uses Grace to communicate lofty scientific concepts like relativity, orbital mechanics and language acquisition to readers clearly and in a way that is immedi-

ately understandable. This in turn makes the narrative approachable to as wide an audience as possible, with readers not having to fear their potential lack of knowledge being a barrier to enjoying the story.

Additionally, outside of efficiently conveying the science half of its sci-fi, “Project Hail Mary” also does a great job at its fiction side, particularly in crafting likable characters. Grace himself is especially great as a protagonist, with him managing to be both an incredibly competent scientist and a massive dork. Looking at its film adaptation, it’s clear why Ryan Gosling was chosen for the role, as Grace’s personality could be summarized as combining the overt goofiness of Gosling’s role as Ken in “Barbie” (well, maybe not quite to that caliber of goofiness) with a bit of the understated sadness he had in more mature films like “Blade Runner: 2049.”

Furthermore, a certain character — unfortunately, spoiled by the film’s recent trailers — may or may not become incredibly relevant to the story midway through. This character in particular, without going into too much detail, proves to be one of the story’s best additions, with their presence adding a strong emotional throughline to piece that makes its conclusion surprisingly impactful.

So, the book itself is a solid read, but will it translate well to screen? Overall, it has the makings of an excellent film, with one or two caveats. For starters, Weir’s writing, while great as a total package, is a little uneven at points. Not all, but much of the humor in

the novel felt fairly forced. At points it verges on what is known online as Reddit or Marvel comedy, which — for those not chronically online — is effectively just sarcastic humor that is unnecessary at best and painfully unfunny at worst.

Moreover, while not a flaw with the novel’s writing, its story structure does not adhere to the traditional “rising action leading to massive climax” that most blockbusters feature. As a result, if the current narrative is followed beat for beat, the film might drag a bit towards the end or feel underwhelming for some viewers.

However, considering the talent of its directors Lord and Miller, the film has a solid chance of ironing out both of those potential flaws. The two have proved to be excellent at writing comedic dialogue in their “Jump Street” films, as well as being equally capable of crafting edge-of-your-seat finales with the “Spider-Verse” movies. With some rewriting of the existing humor and a minor reshuffling of the story’s progression, “Project Hail Mary” could be a superb film.

Putting everything into perspective, a lot has certainly managed to go right for “Project Hail Mary” thus far. It has a great core narrative to work with, a solid leading actor that matches the protagonist’s character and a pair of legendary directors at its helm. Whether or not it sticks the landing, there’s still another two weeks before the film releases. Until then, we will just have to wait and see if the stars have truly aligned for “Project Hail Mary.”