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COLLABORATION YIELDED SURPRISES FOR WOMEN ARTISTS

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There were times when the artists behind "Time Take," a new installation at the Weisman Art Museum, felt more like sisters in a women's club than creative collaborators.

"We'd meet, and I wouldn't have any idea what would come out of it," says writer Marisha Chamberlain. "But our talks were so inspiring, we just knew there was this potential to put something together; something greater than the sum of the parts we put into it."

Chamberlain, photographer Laura Crosby and composer Libby Larsen spent three years fleshing out and sculpting their ideas to probe how women at various stages of life experience time. The results of their work -- 25 black-and-white portraits with accompanying text and music -- fill a wall in a corner gallery at the University of Minnesota's museum.

Crosby photographed Larsen a few years ago, Larsen had written music for one of Chamberlain's plays, and Chamberlain has known Crosby for years, but the artists had never worked together until Crosby suggested a collaboration.

The women didn't apply for grants or approach presenters with a proposal. They didn't want to rush the work, if any work would even materialize, and they met when they could. Through their talks, they discovered they wanted to explore, as Larsen calls it, "the energy of women." They narrowed the focus to exploring the passage of time, how women perceive themselves and their relationships with women around them.

The artists first thought of leading viewers through a sort of time tunnel, modeling an installation after a log ride at the State Fair. That proved impractical, so they focused on a more modest environment.

Crosby started by finding 25 women in a range of age groups -- from infancy to 100 -- and photographing close-up portraits in her studio. Chamberlain wrote seven short verses and thoughts -- she calls them "blurts" -- to accompany them. Around their combined work, Larsen sculpted an odd pallet of sound and music from recordings she pulled from the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution.

"Trusting the process was there from the beginning," Crosby says. "The collaboration eventually took on a life of its own and its own heartbeat."

At the Weisman, the work takes shape on one wall -- the black-and-white photos, each 2 feet square, hang in rows of five, each row representing a 20-year age span. The texts appear as though they're out-of-place captions, laced around the photos like trimming. The audio is an eight-minute loop of dissonant sound -- a stream-of-consciousness chant for a woman shaman in Mexico, recordings of legendary blues singers Vera Hall and Alberta Hunter, women reciting Chamberlain's texts.

The artists liked the idea of exhibiting "Time Take" at the University of Minnesota, where they hope students incorporate the piece into their studies on women and aging. The installation doesn't mark the end of their collaborative "investigation," the artists say.

"There's no formula, and that's why Republicans hate us. You can't plan it, and you can't control it," Larsen says. "We don't know what people will come away with, but we know they will take a journey. We know they will engage."