In Bosnian culture, drinking coffee isn’t done mindlessly, on the go or during other activities, such as reading the newspaper or checking email. To Bosnian Muslims, the act of sitting down to drink a cup of coffee is a deliberate, shared and intimate activity that usually involves family or close personal friends. The Bosnian language has several idioms that refer to the “coffee waiting for you” as a figurative expression of the longing for a loved one to return home.

Bosnian artist and 2002 University of Vermont graduate AiDA Sehovic has adopted this important cultural ritual as a way of honoring the memory of the more than 8000 Muslim men and boys of Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, who never returned home to share coffee with their loved ones.

On July 11, 1995, just as the bloody, three-year Bosnian War was drawing to a close, Bosnian Serb forces under the command of General Ratko Mladic committed the largest act of genocide on European soil since World War II. The victims were nearly all civilian Bosniak (or Bosnian Muslim) men and boys, ostensibly under the protection of a United Nations-declared safe zone. Nevertheless, 400 UN peacekeepers failed to prevent the mass murder, which took place with the full knowledge of the international community.

Nearly every year for the past five years, Sehovic has commemorated the anniversary of that massacre with a temporary art installation and memorial she calls “sto te nema?” or “Why are you not here?” Sehovic places about 8000 fidzans, or traditional Bosnian coffee cups, in a public square, then brews and pours coffee into each one. Each year the number of coffee cups grows, as new bodies are unearthed, identified and reinterred in a mass burial ceremony on the massacre’s anniversary.

Sehovic herself fled the city of Banja Luka, in northwestern Bosnia, in 1992 at the age of 15, just as the Bosnian War began. She and her family immigrated to Turkey, then Germany, before arriving in Burlington in 1997. Sehovic is now
pursuing a graduate degree in art at Hunter College in New York City. Nevertheless, she considers Burlington her second home, as nearly all her family still lives here.

Sehovic, now 34, erected her first temporary memorial to the Srebrenica victims in Sarajevo in 2004. That was the first year that bodies, which had been previously unearthed from mass graves, were formally identified and given proper burials.

What began as a one-time performance-art piece turned into an annual event, or as what she calls a “symbolic gesture of remembering.” Since then, Sehovic has set up “sto te nema?” at the United Nations Plaza in New York City in 2005; in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2006; at the Hague, the Netherlands, in 2008; and in Stockholm, Sweden, in 2009. (She skipped 2007 and 2010.)

This year, Sehovic decided to bring her memorial home to Burlington, where an estimated several thousand Bosnians now live, including about 5 percent of the students at Burlington High School, according to a 2004 UVM report.

As Sehovic explains, the reaction of people to the exhibit differs each year, depending upon what city she’s in. For example, she says the first installation in Sarajevo created “almost a spectacle,” with scores of television cameras and news reporters, as it was the first public art project to specifically address the genocide. A similar outpouring of emotion occurred in Tuzla, she adds, where many of the mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of the Srebrenica victims still live.

The exhibit elicited a somewhat different emotional response in New York City, where, she says, many UN employees seemed acutely aware of their organization’s complicity in the massacre. “It was sort of like a stain on their consciousness,” she says. Likewise in the Netherlands, which is home to the 400 Dutch UN peacekeepers who also failed to stop the bloodshed.

These days, Sehovic considers herself less the creator of this temporary memorial than its caretaker, especially since she describes it as an interactive exhibit that is created anew each year with the reactions of those who stumble upon it.

And, although Sehovic herself didn’t lose loved ones in the Srebrenica Massacre, she says the event has taken on a symbolic significance in the hearts and minds of Bosnian Muslims, in part due to the sheer number of civilians who died there just months before the Dayton Agreement formally ended the war. In that sense, she says, this act of mass murder — “killing all the men so that their seed could not continue” — was especially tragic, and has come to symbolize the hatred and pointlessness of this and all genocides.

Yet, in another sense, Sehovic says this tragedy also gave her emotions and creativity a voice and outlet.

“I don’t know that I would have become an artist if this hadn’t happened to my family and my country,” she adds. “Art helps me talk about that and process it.”

Remember Srebrenica: “sto te nema?” will be displayed on the lower block of the Church Street Marketplace in Burlington on Sunday, July 10, from noon until 6 p.m. Free. (Photos, from Stockholm, Sweden on July 11, 2009, courtesy of the artist.)