

# Rachelle Thiewes Susan Davidoff Beverly Penn

CARRINGTON GALLERY

SAN ANTONIO

by Dan R. Goddard

For El Paso artists Rachelle Thiewes and Susan Davidoff, the desert is a perfect combination of beauty and chaos. The rugged terrain and prickly flora of the Chihuahuan Desert provided the inspiration for their joint show presented by the Carrington Gallery in the Finesilver Building in San Antonio. Both artists like to go walking where nature is armed and dangerous. Navigating the loose rock of the trails as well as avoiding the thorns, needles and other natural defenses of the far West Texas landscape and wildlife is a kind of walking meditation, a form of performance art requiring intense concentration and full awareness of what you are doing with your body.

Thiewes draws on the structure of desert plants to create the designs for her unique silver-and-slate jewelry. Her necklaces suggest giant mesquite thorns

series of walks we took last fall in Madera Canyon," Davidoff said. "We recorded our conversations and Beverly used them as the basis for her writings, which have three different levels: the theoretical, the geological and the personal. We decided that what made the desert so unique was the combination of beauty and chaos, which became our theme. You can't have beauty without chaos. There's something spontaneous yet structured about desert life."

Each book contains four drawings by Davidoff and a single silver piece by Thiewes. Bound by Smithville book-binder Priscilla Spittler, the books are as elegant and beautiful as medieval illuminated manuscripts, but with a sleek, post-modern look. There is no writing in the books, but they are encased in metal sleeves which have been engraved, almost

Rachelle Thiewes

Susan Davidoff

Beverly Penn

*Beauty Chaos* Installation, 1999

Book No.1

Silver, 18k gold, charcoal and natural material on paper

12" x 12" x 12" w/metal slip cover

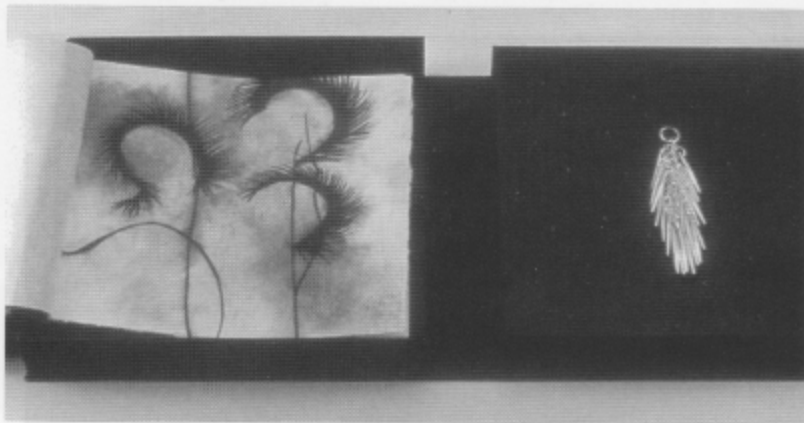
Courtesy the artists

*Paradise./Outside things are inherently evil.  
The beasts are out there, the savages are out  
there./Wilderness is a realm to be tamed and  
controlled./So shaped the American frontier.*

In her large drawings, Davidoff often works from small specimens of desert plant life. She blows them up to a giant scale, although the detail is obscured in pitch-black silhouettes created with layer upon layer of charcoal. But like the Zen-influenced, monochromatic landscape paintings of the 16th-century Japanese artist Hasegawa Tohaku, her drawings are more emotional and lyrical than objective and precise. Her plants take on a rough-and-tumble life, windblown and pulled in different directions by the elements. Her drawings are romantic, but not sentimental. As part of her mixed-media pieces, she includes scientific plant drawings from turn-of-the-century surveys, providing a vivid contrast to her own passionate, dark-as-midnight impressions.

Chance plays a large role in Thiewes' jewelry designs, which are not always practical or wearable. She makes them while listening to the music of John Coltrane, and like his music, her designs combine improvisational chaos with highly structured beauty. The silver pieces are accented with finely cut circles of shale, decorated with small stripes, suggesting rock paintings or other American Indian forms. Her silver work is smooth and streamlined, almost minimalist, reminiscent of seeds or shells. Echoing the structure of desert plant forms, her jewelry shifts and shimmers, changing spontaneously with the way they are held or flung about, then resuming a natural, ordered shape when the law of gravity takes hold.

Dan Goddard is the arts writer for the *San Antonio Express-News*.



and her bracelets reflect the forms of ferns and cacti. Using charcoal and oil, as well as organic materials such as juniper berries and tree bark, Davidoff records the plant life of the desert in a series of large, delicate drawings influenced by Japanese landscape paintings, with flattened perspective. Together, they collaborated on a series of eight artists' books, which also feature poems by Austin artist Beverly Penn.

"These works are all based on a

like topographical maps, with the words by Penn. Along with free-flowing personal observations derived from the artists' recorded conversations and objective descriptions of the region's geological history, Penn writes more formal poetry:

*Landscape, the breath of Manifest  
Destiny. Landscape, the desirable  
frontier./Landscape, the negotiable edge  
between Garden and Wilderness./Inside the  
Garden things are controlled, familiar and  
inherently good. The Garden is created*