

Artists find inspiration in desert's life, intensity

By DAN R. GODDARD

EXPRESS-NEWS ARTS WRITER

Out where nature is armed and dangerous, El Paso artists Susan Davidoff and Rachelle Thiewes like to go walking.

The rugged terrain and prickly flora of the Chihuahuan Desert are the inspiration for their joint show being presented through June 15 by the Carrington Gallery at the Finesilver Building.

"We've done a lot of hiking together and there are similarities in our work, although our styles are extremely different," says Thiewes, who teaches at the University of Texas at El Paso. "The desert is very physical; you have to be very aware of what you're doing with your

body when you go walking there. If you fall down, there are thorns and rocks that can really hurt you. It's a kind of walking meditation. To us, it's a form of performance art."

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 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 Asian art.

As part of her mixed-media pieces,

■ See CHIHUAHUAN/3D



SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Susan Davidoff's 'Canyon Walk, Grasses, Canna' was inspired by walks in the Chihuahuan Desert.

Chihuahuan Desert influences exhibit

Continued from 1D

she's included scientific plant drawings from turn-of-the-century surveys with her own passionate, dark-as-midnight impressions.

They've created a series of artists' books, combining Davidoff's small drawings and Thiewes' cascading sculptural jewelry pieces.

Bound by Smithville bookbinder Priscilla Spitler, the books are contained within metal sleeves engraved with poetry by Austin artist Beverly Penn.

Elegant and exquisite, these books are the contemporary equivalent of medieval illuminated manuscripts.

"These works are all based on a series of walks we took last fall in the Madera Canyon. 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," Davidoff says.

"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," she adds.

Often working from small specimens of desert plant life, Davidoff blows them up to a giant scale, although the detail is obscured in pitch-black silhouettes created by layer upon layer of charcoal.

But there's more emotion than scientific objectivity in her work. Her plants take on a rough-and-tumble kind of life, windblown and pulled in different directions by the elements. Her drawings are romantic, but not sentimental.

"Asian artists have been doing this for 2,000 years so I've certainly learned something from them," Davidoff says. "By making the leaves so much larger, I am trying to focus people's awareness on the underlying structure of nature. All the colors that I use are natural colors."

A few of Davidoff's drawings come from her walks on tropical islands, palm trees outlined against a sundown-streaked sky.

“
We decided that what made the desert so unique was the combination of beauty and chaos. . . . You can't have beauty without chaos.

— Susan Davidoff, artist

“
Chance plays a large role in Thiewes' jewelry designs, which are not always practical or wearable. But they shift and shimmer, changing shape as they are lifted and dropped.

The finely cut shale, decorated with small stripes, suggests rock paintings or other American Indian forms, but her silverwork is smooth and streamlined, almost minimalist, reminiscent of seeds or shells.

"Many of my designs were created to the music of John Coltrane," Thiewes says. "He was someone who really understood the relationship between chaos and order. But what looks like an accident in my work often takes a long time to achieve. It doesn't look right if you just throw it down on the floor. That's why structure is so important, too."

Davidoff also teaches part time at UTEP. Her work has been purchased by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Thiewes cuts a colorful figure with her blue and purple hair, and her awards range from a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship to an El Paso Energy Foundation award for teaching excellence. Davidoff's and Thiewes' collaborative exhibit debuted in November at the Adair Margo Gallery in El Paso.

Alice Carrington, whose Carrington Gallery no longer has a permanent space, said she has known Davidoff for 10 years and thought the show needed to come to San Antonio. She also joined forces with Musical Bridges to present concerts of songs of nature in conjunction with the exhibit.

"It's been more than a year since we had a show, but this one seemed just right for us," Carrington says. "People keep offering me spaces to have shows so if people keep following me around, I'll keep having them."

The Susan Davidoff and Rachelle Thiewes exhibit runs through June 15 at the Carrington Gallery at the Finesilver Building, 816 Camaron, 826-1362.

dgoddard@express-news.net