

'Common Language'

El Paso artists find inspiration in Finland, a place as unlike home as possible

By Doug Pullen
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PHOTOS COURTESY SUZI DAVIDOFF AND RACHELLE THIEWES

Visual "Language," top to bottom: Artists Suzi Davidoff and Rachelle Thiewes applied red cochineal dye to an exposed root in the Upper Valley, strung lime green fishing bobs across a lake in Finland, the other from the El Paso area.

A bench inside the room allows the viewer space for quiet reflection. "It's continuing the idea of looking closely and immersing yourself in the environment," Davidoff said.

"We're hoping people will just sit and get lost for a while," Thiewes added.

The third element of their exhibit is a double-sided book, another kind of dialogue, which features more images and short, impressionistic phrases inspired by them, like "Life shows up, finds a place." One side features images from Finland, the other from the El Paso area.

Lambert, who got a "good feel" for Fiskars after spending two weeks there, wrote the text, which he tried to keep short, informative and entertaining.

There's talk of taking the exhibit on tour, and the artists have put together 20 copies of a special-edition box that includes handmade fabric by New Mexico artist Priscilla Spitzer, drawings, a copy of the book, a CD of the music and more. It sells for \$500.

They agree that "Common Language" was a unique opportunity to create outside of their usual working environments. "The reason we were interested in doing this without some super, designed plan," Davidoff said, "was we were not interested in using studio space."

They learned just what a change of scenery can do, and how to appreciate the scenery around us all — before we irreparably change it.

"We were creating things that make people look more closely at the environment," Thiewes said. "Maybe they'll take care of it."

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en to them, including clay from a Finnish fjord used to create imaginary steps made with a stencil on a dock by a lake. Clay made from local shale was applied to more steps stenciled on raised, planklike boards in a poppy-covered former military firing range in the Franklin Mountains.

"What ties it together is trying to get people to look closely at the environment," Thiewes said.

Their photos are large-scale, printed on aluminum sheets using photo emulsion, which cre-

ates a three-dimensional effect, a technique they saw in Finland. Ten of the images measure 31 by 45 inches; the other two are 45 by 68. After a lengthy search, the artists found a place in North Carolina, which has worked with Disney Pixar, to manufacture them.

Another key component of "Common Language" is a pair of 18-minute videos the artists filmed: one depicting the flowing, shallow water of the Rio Grande near New Mexico, the other the lapping waves of a Finnish lake. They play in a continuous loop on an 8-by-10-foot screen mounted inside a triangular room.

The videos are set to ambient music by Thiewes' husband, guitarist Dan Lambert, who played a Chinese stringed instrument called a ruan, backed by percussionists Ricardo Amaya and Erik Hickerson, who used conventional and water percussion.

"I wanted a drifting, coming and going rhythm, along with parts that had more of an undercurrent of rhythm, moving along but careful about the dynamics," said Lambert. He said it was important to "color what's up on the screen."

Make plans

► **What:** "Common Language — Punctuating the Landscape," a multimedia installation by Suzi Davidoff and Rachelle Thiewes.

► **When:** Today through Sept. 25.

► **Where:** Gateway Gallery, El Paso Museum of Art.

► **Hours:** Noon-5 p.m. Sundays, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, 9 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays.

► **How much:** Free.

► **Information:** 532-1707, elpasoartmuseum.org.

Related events

► **"The Fiskars Experience,"** a presentation by Davidoff and Thiewes, 2 p.m. May 1, followed by a book signing.

► **30-minute "zip" tour** led by museum curator Christian Gerstheimer, 12:15 p.m. June 8.

► **Discussion** by Davidoff and Thiewes, 12:15 p.m. Aug. 31.

All the events are free.



Rachelle Thiewes, left, and Suzi Davidoff in their "office" in Fiskars, Finland.

El Paso artists Suzi Davidoff and Rachelle Thiewes took few supplies — colored tape, gold leaf, a high-end camera, a low-end tripod — when they left for a two-month art residency in Finland in 2009.

"We went over there with nothing and had no idea what we were going to do. After one week, we thought, 'Oh, (bleep), what are we gonna do?' " laughed Thiewes, an internationally known metals artist and art professor at the University of Texas at El Paso.

"We were panicked," added Davidoff, a nationally known painter, printmaker and part-time lecturer with the UTEP art department.

But they did come up with something, a three-pronged multimedia exhibit titled "Common Language — Punctuating the Landscape" that took both of them out of their usual environments, physically and creatively, and got them to examine the world around them.

"Common Language" opens a six-month run today in the Gateway Gallery on the first floor of the El Paso Museum of Art, part of the museum's 50th-anniversary celebration.

It consists of a dozen large-scale, aluminum-mounted photographs of gently manipulated landscapes in El Paso and Finland, a triangular room where viewers can soak in ambient videos and music, and a two-sided book of images and phrases they inspired.

Those calming summer months in Fiskars, an arts village in western Finland, let the artists peel away the clutter of their daily lives.

Surrounded by other artists, seduced by the verdant landscape of their temporary home, it didn't take long for a vision to emerge. "Common Language" is the uncommon linkage of two landscapes, the brown desert they've known for years and the lushness of another, green world.

"After the first three weeks we were there, the project revealed itself," Davidoff said.

"Common Language" is their visual dialogue about these two vastly different parts of the world. Their subjects were natural and manufactured objects, their words the mundane items, such as colored marking tape, used to temporarily alter the subjects they photographed.

Davidoff, who often uses natural objects in her work, and Thiewes, whose specialty is body art, placed an egg-shaped rock, painted red, on concrete steps grown over by a Finnish forest, an image of nature's inevitable creep. A box of red bullets scattered on the ground at White Sands National Monument serves as a reminder of man's potent ability to destroy his environment.

Lime-green fishing bobs are strung across a Finnish lake in a photo, while another uses red cochineal, a dye used in ancient Mexico, to highlight a gnarled, exposed root protruding from the 10-foot wall of an Upper Valley wash.

"Whether they were man-made or not, we found structures and did things to them to emphasize our landscape," Thiewes said.

Some materials, like the fishing bobs, were purchased in Finland. Others were found or giv-