

## *Common Language, Punctuating the Landscape*

Suzi Davidoff & Rachelle Thiewes

March 27 – September 25, 2011

Gateway Gallery at the El Paso Art Museum

Exhibition Review by:

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*Common Language, Punctuating the Landscape* by two west Texas artists, Suzi Davidoff and Rachelle Thiewes, consists of three distinct but intimately related art works: lush, large-scale photographs printed directly on aluminum, a mesmerizing twin-screen video production, and a beautiful limited-edition hand-bound book in an exquisite portfolio box that also contains an original artwork. *Common Language* is on view in the Gateway Gallery on the first floor of the El Paso Art Museum through September 25, 2011. Each of the components of *Common Language* could easily stand alone as individually they document the heart of the artists' collaboration: interventions or environmental installations that respond to radically distinct landscapes on two different continents. The project began when the artists, who have collaborated for over ten years, received a joint residency to the Fiskars Village Artists in Residence program, an artist's cooperative founded in 2006 and located some 100 kilometers west of Helsinki in the municipality of Raseborg, South Finland. The artists dusted off their traveling gear, packed up their bags, and left the west Texas city of El Paso, just across the border from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Wedged into the northern reaches of the Chihuahuan Desert in North America, the arid desert landscape where the artists worked from El Paso to Albuquerque, couldn't be more different than the fertile, southern coast of Finland with its medieval stone architecture (think castles and cathedrals), picturesque villages and idyllic harbor towns, abundant water and thick green forests.

Attuned to the parched desert, the artists suddenly found themselves moored in the land of 188,000 lakes and more green moss than they had ever previously had the pleasure of wiggling their toes in. The artworks that resulted from a year and a half of intense collaboration provide a kind of musical score in two distinct timbres or keys – the sparse, deep baritone of the desert paired with the gentle lilting operatic soprano of the forest. Rather than compare and contrast the differences between the landscapes, the artists found beauty in both places and responded accordingly. Their supplies: Cochineal (the distinct scarlet red pigment made from insects found on prickly pear cactus) colored flagging tape, mud, shale, fishing weights, tiny silver dragees used to decorate cupcakes, paper & drawing pencils, and, because of the differences in the quality of the reflected light, gold leaf in Finland and silver leaf in the Chihuahuan Desert.

What began as interventions of place, influenced by but not derivative of Andy Goldsworthy, that the artists hoped would be discovered by passersby had to be documented and brought back to the studio. Neither artist is a photographer; Thiewes is a jeweler interested in the active participation of those who wear her jewelry and Davidoff is a painter and print maker long interested in perception and structure in the natural world—they quickly realized that it was through video and still images that this work would be preserved and displayed. The large scale photographs they made and had printed on aluminum achieve a shimmering three-dimensional quality that has to be experienced in person to realize its full effect. The dried mud on the *Dock at Kivijarvi* carefully laid out in perfect oval stepping stones has the same surface quality as the chill waters of the rippling lake to which it lazily leads. The darker water of the *Rio Grande* is equally inviting as glowing yellow fishing weights bob quietly across an international border. One of the most pleasing qualities of the aluminum is the luminous effect it has on color and depth as in the enigmatic *Path to Riisla*. The twin screen video project draws one in with image and sound. Positioned as the screens are in the El Paso Museum is unfortunate. This deeply introspective production begs a dark engulfing space with surround-sound in which to lose oneself in private reverie. Open to the rest of the enormous and echoing gallery, conflicting noises