

Sembra-Sol auction aids farmworkers

The International Museum of Art on Montana will host the 2011 Sembra-Sol Art Exhibition and Auction the first weekend in March. The trademark suns will be available for preview on Friday, March 4, and for purchase, via both live and silent auctions, during the opening reception 2–5 p.m. Saturday, March 5. Proceeds will benefit the Centro de los Trabajadores Agrícolas Fronterizos (Farm Workers' Center) at 201 E. 9th in downtown El Paso.

Sembra-Sol was conceived six years ago when members of Sin Fronteras, led by Alicia Chacon and Lilly Limon, decided to organize a series of events that would not only commemorate the life and work of Chicano activist César Chavez, but also raise the consciousness about the living conditions of migrant workers in El Paso.

They began with a fundraising dinner, and the second year they added the Sembra-Sol Art Exhibition, under the leadership of three artists — Francisco Romero, Tony Piña and Gaspar Enriquez — who felt that it was important for the El Paso art community to play a part in the vital role of advancing the cause of social justice here along the border.

The sun is symbolic of warmth and a nurturing force in the lives of these farmworkers. Participating artists are asked to decorate a wooden sunburst in keeping with their own artistic style. The unique suns are then auctioned. Prices typically range from \$25 to \$100 — or even much higher. A work created by Alberto Escamilla sold for \$1,000 three years ago.

Perhaps some of the most unusual works this year are suns decorated by the students of ceramicist Teresa Altschul. Natives of Argentina, she and her husband, Ricardo, became El Paso residents nearly two decades ago. Now an active member of the local arts community, Altschul has established a reputation for her unique clay creations. Rather than using a potter's wheel, the artist forms each piece by hand-shaping and layering the clay, and adding intricate designs, textures and special glazes to complete each individual piece.

In addition to pursuing her own craft, Altschul conducts classes for students of varying ages at her home studio. Hoping to challenge their creativity, Altschul told them about Sembra-Sol and most were very eager to participate.

She enthuses, "From the youngest, to the teenagers and adults, there is a 'good' feeling of accomplishment and of giving that extends to their families and friends. Especially for the young ceramic students, to show their work is not only an opportunity to participate in a professional art show, but at the same time they feel positive about raising money for a charity."

Once they have chosen a theme for their sun, the students will shape, fire and paint each individual segment, finally attaching the ceramic pieces to the wooden sunburst to complete their designs.

"For each 'sol,'" Altschul relates, many hours are spent "designing the subject, composing, and through the work of their hands applying color with oxides and



glazes, and finally of expectation when the pieces are emerging from the kiln."

Painting and glazing these segments is an especially challenging process, she added, because they must match backgrounds already painted on the wooden suns.

The Sembra-Sol annual auction and additional events have helped sustain the Farm Workers' Center, which serves both as a gathering place for laborers and employees, and also provides part-time shelter for those who work in the fields, planting and harvesting crops such as cotton, chile and onions to name but a few. Buses from around the region pick up workers at the center as early as 2 a.m., transporting them to fields as distant as Hatch. In the afternoon, workers return to the center to clean up, have a hot meal and then sleep.

Limon explains that most of these workers are older persons who lack education or are not physically able to do other jobs, so their only employment option is working 12-hour days in the fields. Although many are U.S. citizens, and actually have homes in town, the long work hours make it necessary for them to remain at the center during harvest and planting season, going home to family only on weekends.

For more in-depth information on Sembra-Sol or the Farm Workers' Center, contact Lilly Limon at 253-1616.

Common Language: Punctuating the Landscape

The foundation for "Common Language," opening at the El Paso Museum of Art on March 27, was laid in the fall of 2009 when Rachelle Thiewes and Suzie Davidoff took part in a two-month residency at Finland's Fiskars Village, a cooperative of artisans, designers and artists who come together to create their art in this exceptionally inspiring environment.

While in Finland, the two artists focused on creating works that compared and contrasted elements from both the Finnish landscape and the landscape here along the Rio Grande.

Thiewes explains, "Suzie and I were constantly investigating, learning and seeing what the landscape could say to us by examining common elements in both our individual and collaborative work. Inspired by our observations of these diverse locations, we wanted to create work that would cause people to take a closer look at their own physical landscape, including elements such as mud, or the bark of a tree, and see how things as simple as these affect their own lives."

The unusual exhibition is comprised of

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three major components: large-scale photographs printed directly on aluminum, video projections and a published book, all directly referencing the site-specific installations created. The photographs, videos and book are essential records and extensions of each installation, which, because of its temporality, could only be experienced for a short time before being dismantled or worn away by natural forces.

The photographs represent new technology that is just beginning to be available in the U.S. In the past, most photographs on aluminum were actually printed on paper that was then laminated to the metal. For "Common Language," printing was done directly on the aluminum.

Thiewes explains, "Suzie and I had only seen photographers showing this kind of work in a few contemporary museums in Europe, and then I saw it again when I did a lecture and museum show in Taiwan. In printing these photos, we wanted to go directly to the aluminum because it gave a certain kind of realistic illumination. Individuals looking at these will have the sensation of actually being there at the location."

Thiewes explains that the works created both in Finland and later in El Paso were of a very temporary nature: "We were incredibly low tech in what we did using materials such as marking tape, silver and gold leaf, and other basic things which would biodegrade after time.

"Even though we went out into the countryside in Finland, we actually had more visitors because they walk a lot there and it was mushroom- and berry-picking season. Conversely, in El Paso, even though a few people came across us as we were working, none of them asked what we were doing. This lack of curiosity surprised us a bit because of the diversity of areas where we worked, such as (along) the Rio Grande, west by Santa Teresa, the mountain near Kern place and even as far away as White Sands."

Awards and honors

Congratulations to local portrait artist **Rosario Ponte**, whose painting "Haide" was accepted as part of the 2011 Salon International Exhibition hosted by the prestigious GreenHouse Gallery in San Antonio.

The Texas Medal of Art awards were held in Austin, Feb. 28–March 1, and it was exciting news to learn that **James Drake** was one of the recipients of the 2011 Texas Medal of Arts award. Former award winners have included well-known names such as Willie Nelson and Vicki Carr. Drake joins the late **José Cisneros** as one of only two artists from El Paso to have received this award.

A graduate of Bel Air High School, Drake worked out of his studio in El Paso until moving to New York City in 1998 and later to Santa Fe. The El Paso Museum of Art has several of his works in its permanent collection, and five of his large sculptures currently dominate the museum lobby, including the unique copper boxes and spools of yarn that reflect memories of the time he spent working at Mayatex, a family-owned business in south El Paso that imported yarns and woven items.

The medal presentation had an additional El Paso link: **Adair Margo** co-chaired the event along with Alice Carrington Foulz, who served with Margo on the Texas Commission on the Arts from 1987 to 1993. The artwork selected for the invitation and the theme of the evening was Tom Lea's "Southwest" mural at the El Paso Public Library Main Branch.

Accompanying it are Lea's words, "Its richness is in space, wide and deep and infinitely colored, visible to the jagged mountain rim of the world — huge and challenging space, to evoke high and challenging freedom."

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