

ARTISTIC DUO FINDS 'COMMON LANGUAGE' IN DIFFERENT LANDS, EACH OTHER

BY RYAN B. MARTINEZ

El Paso artists Suzi Davidoff and Rachelle Thiewes had little in mind when they headed to the idyllic arts-and-tourism haven of Fiskars Village, Finland, for a two-month residency in October 2009.

They packed drawing materials, odd supplies – and open minds.

"We decided we weren't going to plan it, that perhaps the whole purpose of going away was to not have something that was etched in stone but to really take advantage of this opportunity," Thiewes said.

Fast-forward to today, and the two nationally known artists have amply filled in the blanks the experience afforded to them. The result is "Common Language: Punctuating the Landscape," a book of photography and a new exhibit at the El Paso Museum of Art.

This collaboration, their third, was about exploration – in a new country, in their homeland, of a deepening artistic rapport and of cutting-edge techniques in photo printing.

"There really is so much to this project," Thiewes said.

"Common Languages," which includes 20 photos in an elegant two-sided book and 12 in the meditative exhibit space at EPMA's Gateway Gallery, focuses its lens



Weights and floats drift on the Rio Grande in this shot from "Common Languages."



Echoing the shot to the right, the moss-covered Riis aqueducts are also "punctuated."

on the lush forests of Finland and the dry landscape of the Chihuahuan Desert.

But there's a catch: Each of the photos is accentuated by the delicate placement of a manmade item – a sly insinuation that goads the viewer into considering the relationship between nature and us.

It took a couple of weeks of exploring the Fiskars area on foot before the idea congealed and cooled for both artists, whose individual work often visits themes of place and nature. Thiewes is a jewelry and metals art professor at UTEP; Davidoff, a painter, printmaker and part-time lecturer at UTEP.

"We didn't have a car, and a really

important aspect of being there and our piece was this constant walking," Davidoff said. "We walked everywhere. When you walk places, you really get to know a smaller area than you would in a car, but you get to know it much better."

That method led them to picturesque spots such as Riisla, where moss had overgrown abandoned aqueducts in a forested area – a case of nature slowly, quietly reclaiming what man had once took from it. The artists strung together fishing weights on a fishing line across its width.

In other shots, they gold-leafed branches, red-taped trees, placed pink trim around

patches of moss, and matted patterns of clay onto piers.

"The ones we kept had some sort of an enigmatic presence in the landscape and usually had a landscape feature that they were accentuating or addressing," Davidoff said. "There wasn't that much that was really, really random about what we did."

There was no division of labor between the collaborators, who have known each other since the '80s and worked together on two previous exhibitions since 2009.

"With our two past collaborations, you

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certainly could see the imprint of each of us individually. With this one, you can't," Thiewes said. "We cannot even tell who had what idea – that's how tight everything ended up being. It was almost sort of like we came to the ideas together at the same time, which is just a rarity."

After two months, the pair said goodbye to their neighbors at Fiskars, a quiet, quaint village founded in 1649. It has a long industrial history; its careful, staggered lumbering practices were an inspiration for some of the pair's work, Thiewes said.

Once back in El Paso, both artists continued the project over six months at sites in Palisades Canyon, White Sands and Santa Teresa.

In Fiskars they had time to reflect; in El Paso the pair had to finish the project amid bustling daily lives and, towards the end, the heat of a local May.

"Something we really wanted to do was the railroad tracks," Thiewes said of one of the more dangerous shoots. "It's this man-made object that's important to society, but it's out in the middle of nowhere and the land has been disrupted just a little bit, but that's it."

Desert rats visiting the EPMA exhibit will be drawn to the lush green of the Finland shots, but the preference is biased, the artists maintain.

"We really made a conscious effort to not contrast the beautiful, lush, green forest



Silver-colored Finnish candy looks like an alien egg in the grass in this shot from "Common Languages."

with the barren, 'ugly' desert because both of us love the desert a lot," Davidoff said.

When the pair showed photos of local scenery to the Finns, they were as in awe of the exotic desert as we would be of Finnish forests, both artists said. The cacti are always spikier on the other side.

The two-sided book, which flips to separate sections on each landscape, sells for \$60 at the El Paso Museum of Art. The exhibit, immediately in view at the museum's entrance, provides an immersive experience. Besides the subject matter, it distinguishes itself with cutting-edge aluminum canvases and a multimedia room.

The printing technique is brand new in the art world; Thiewes and Davidoff stumbled on an example at Kiasma, the major

contemporary art museum in Helsinki.

"The type in the walls were in Finnish and English, but I can read aluminum – I can read metals in any language," Thiewes said.

What she read was remarkable. This technique, which both artists have found in Europe and Asia exhibits, is rare in North America, where they found only one manufacturer after a long search.

Its manufacture is still a bit of a mystery. "I talked to the developer of the process here," Davidoff said. "He wasn't real clear. He wasn't telling me exactly how they did it. The image is not a clear photograph applied to an aluminum backing. It is actually in the aluminum."

The effect is a boost in the illumination and sense of dimension; you feel like you can step into some of the photos at the "Common Languages" exhibit.

"Because of that white quality of the aluminum, you're able to actually pick up the colors of the photograph – the true colors of it," Thiewes said. "That was something that was really important when we shot these photographs."

The immersion continues with a triangle-shaped room: On separate walls flash two three- to four-minute loops of images of water, one of the Rio Grande and another of a Finnish lake. A bench rests against the third wall, where visitors can sit, watch the patterns in the water and become entranced by ambient sounds recorded by

Thiewes' husband, local guitarist (and What's Up writer) Dan Lambert, and percussionists Erik Hickerson and Ricardo Amaya.

The whole package – book, exhibit and meditation spot – aims to tweak your perceptions of place ever so slightly.

"I don't think as an artist you can ever dictate what the viewer is going to take away," Davidoff said. "I hope the viewer will always take away from any works that I'm a part of just a little more appreciation for the natural world and this idea that you can look more closely at things and maybe see something you had missed."

DETAILS

"COMMON LANGUAGE: PUNCTUATING THE LANDSCAPE"

Works by Suzi Davidoff and Rachelle Thiewes
El Paso Museum of Art
1 Arts Festival Plaza

Now through September 25
Reception for Members and VIPs:
Thursday, April 21, 6 p.m.
A book signing will follow in the
Museum store

Museum hours
Tuesday-Saturday (except Thur): 9
a.m.-5 p.m.
Thursday: 9 a.m.-9 p.m.
Sunday: noon-5 p.m.
Mondays and holidays: closed