



When we think of Fiskars, the corporation's familiar orange-handled scissors immediately come to mind. Less well-known in the United States is Fiskars Village, a Finnish village dating to the 17th-century, surrounding the site of the original Fiskars Ironworks. In the 1990s the village became home to a cooperative of cabinetmakers, ceramicists, industrial designers, and other artisans working in a variety of media and crafts. El Paso-based artists Rachelle Thiewes and Susan Davidoff spent two months in the village as part of a residency program where they created *Common Language*, a collaborative project on exhibit at Zane Bennett Contemporary Art that documents, through photographs, a series of site-specific installations based on the interaction of human-made and natural landscapes.

Common Language, running concurrently with *Regeneration*, a series of Davidoff's works on paper, is the most recent joint project between Thiewes and Davidoff, who have worked together off and on for more than a decade. "Our first project was back in, I think, 1999," Thiewes told *Pasatiempo*. "We did a book project with one other artist named Beverly Penn. It was a small edition of eight books." For their first collaboration, Thiewes, a jewelry maker, refashioned several of her pieces as small sculptural objects and included them inside each book along with drawings by Davidoff. The books were presented as metal-covered, boxlike portfolios. Penn wrote the text. Every book was an original rather than a series of copies. "We saw a lot of similarities in our work, not so much in a visual way but in how we thought about our work and what we drew inspiration from," Thiewes said. "We thought it would be interesting to present an aspect of each of our work together for the general public. We had quite a few opportunities to show the book project and did pretty well placing them in some museum collections."

Finland was another matter. The nature of the project required space and time for its realization. "We went to Finland not knowing what we were going to do, actually, and taking no supplies with us," she said. "After about a week we decided we wanted to do site-specific installations in the landscape using what we came with and a few materials we got while we were there. Some of the installations we did may still be there. It's been a few years."

"We wanted to be really open to the environment and this artist community we were living in," Davidoff said. "We thought it would be pointless to go with a preconceived notion of what we wanted to do, which made it very exciting and sort of scary." The installations call attention to existing patterns in the landscape that betray human interference. Their photograph *Långsjö Woods 9.3*, for instance, depicts a forested region that shows evidence of lumbering. "They would go in and plant and then cut," Thiewes said. "It was an area that had been cut and replanted probably a few times, and the trees were all evenly spaced." Thiewes and Davidoff photographed the trees after marking their trunks with tape. The tape appears at roughly the same height on each one, although uneven terrain and distance between foreground

continued on Page 58

Michael Abatemarco | The New Mexican

REMAKING PLACES

Artists Rachelle Thiewes & Susan Davidoff make their marks in Finland and El Paso.



Left, Susan Davidoff and Rachelle Thiewes: *Path to Alsviken 8.11*, 2009, photograph/aluminum

Below left, *Långsjö Woods 9.3*, 2009, photograph/aluminum

Below, *Santa Teresa Red 10.31*, 2010, photograph/aluminum

Bottom right, *Santa Teresa Wash 5.25*, 2010, photograph/aluminum

Opposite page, Susan Davidoff: *Regeneration — Fire Map With Thistles*, 2013, charcoal, earth, graphite, watercolor, and wax on paper



Davidoff & Thiewes, continued from Page 56

and background trees suggest the markings were actually applied at different levels. For *Långsjö Woods 9.3*, the artists were working with a pre-existing pattern: the spacing of the trees. In other images, however, the artists created patterns themselves such as circles painted on top of a small, privately owned dock. "The reality is that those really are ovals and not round, but wherever we stood they read as more circular," Thiewes said. "We had made a stencil of an oval pattern that was similar to our foot shape. We measured the distance between our feet as we were walking and imprinted each of those oval shapes to mimic our walking pattern to the end of the dock."

Common Language can be read as a series of artistic interventions executed with reverence for natural objects and the environment. "The first piece we did is called *Path to Alsviken*," Davidoff said. "It was a big root across a path to a lake where people used to go swimming, and we gold-leafed it. Even though we were doing this in a remote, rural site, lots of people had to walk over it to get to where they were going. The interaction of the people with the piece was interesting. Some people would notice and other people wouldn't." A second root was coated in El Paso, using silver leaf instead of gold.

Davidoff's *Regeneration* series had a similar genesis to that of *Common Language*, inspired by walks through natural landscapes. On these walks, Davidoff collected items such as lichen, earth, and cochineal for use as either natural pigmentation or directly applied elements of her paintings. "Many of the things I use, like cochineal, have a long history of being used as natural pigments, but I'll use anything I find that will make color." Davidoff's *Fire Map With Thistles* is one of a number of pieces that explores the theme of new growth in the aftermath of a recent forest fire in the Davis Mountains of West Texas. "These are pieces from within the last year when we started getting rains," the artist said. "There has been this incredible amount of growth, some different plants and a profusion of plants that were there pretty sparsely before the fire. That's what *Regeneration* refers to. A number of them include Forest Service fire maps that charted the extent of the fire. They include other materials, too, like mica, earth, plant materials, and some silver."

While *Regeneration* incorporates material from Davidoff's Texas surroundings, *Common Language* became a transnational project with several installations made in Finland and several more in El Paso. "We thought it would be interesting to finish the project when we got back to El Paso," Thiewes said. "Some pieces would be a response to what we did in Finland and others would be different ways of looking at the landscape in El Paso, not as a response but as an extension."

"Finland was the exact opposite of the landscape we both live in," Davidoff said.

None of the projects were intended to be long-term, and the photographs stand as a record of the installations. "Some of them we left to wear off in time," Davidoff said. "Others, like the tape on the trees, we went and took off ourselves, because we didn't want to damage the trees or have someone mistake them for trees that needed to be cut down." On occasion, when revisiting sites in Finland and Texas months after photographing them, they discovered that their work no longer remained. "Much of what we did was in remote areas," Thiewes said. "When we were working, we rarely ran across people, but we would come back a week later and what we'd done had been taken." Davidoff and Thiewes are unconcerned about the ephemeral nature of their projects. Perhaps whoever took the silver-leafed tree root that eventually went missing from the El Paso area appreciated its aesthetic value. "We like to think they did," Thiewes said. ◀

details

- ▼ Susan Davidoff & Rachel Thiewes: *Common Language* & Davidoff: *Regeneration*
- ▼ Opening reception 5 p.m. Friday, Aug. 30; through Sept. 20
- ▼ Zane Bennett Contemporary Art, 435 S. Guadalupe St., 982-8111