

Interconnected Truth

The profound exhibit *Virga* expresses the delicate, precarious balance of humanity and the natural world

Betsy Bruner

The fresh smell of vegetative material fills the nostrils of visitors as they enter the main gallery at the Coconino Center for the Arts.

Is it a barn? No, it's "Virga: the Hunt for Water," the current exhibit at the center that explores our relationship with the natural world. Perhaps the hay-like smell emanates primarily from "A Bed in Sky, above Kandahar," one of six installations that comprise the "Virga" show.

The exhibit, nine years in the making, is the work of local artist Shawn Skabelund who emptied 45 black plastic bags of Quetta pine needles, indigenous to Afghanistan and Pakistan, into a circular retainer to create the Kandahar piece.

His effort to spend four years collecting the needles at Dead Horse Ranch State Park is symbolic of the care Skabelund exercises when creating his elegant installations.

The concept for the exhibition began in 2003 when he was awarded an Arizona Project Grant from the Arizona Commission for the Arts for his project proposal, which was also titled "Virga: the Hunt for Water," a name he kept for this show.

The term *virga* is defined as moisture that evaporates before reaching the ground as precipitation, and captures the lyrical mood of a show that is based on an almost poetic observation of nature.

"The lesson not only for artists, but for all of us as humans, is to look, and then, to look again, for all art is, is a search for truth," Skabelund writes in his artist statement for the exhibit.

Using landscapes as a studio

After receiving the Arizona Commission for the Arts project grant, Skabelund spent a year doing intense research, which initiated the original designs of each installation, based on the formal element of the circle. Each of the installations in "Virga" explores Skabelund's relationship to specific local ecosystems within northern Arizona.

Examples of this relationship include the charred ponderosa pine logs salvaged from burned slash piles on the Coconino National Forest. These charred timbers make up "Standing at the Fire's Edge." Hundreds of these blackened forms stand like individual people, witnessing in awe the smoke rising above, and aspen pole as a symbol of hope. Skabelund's children, Adrian and Chiara Rose, who attend Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy, carried the aspen pole from their dad's studio through the forest and to the art center, all while walking on stilts.

Seven ceramic sewer pipes from the old Grand Canyon Village sewage line also hold the form together. Nested inside each pipe is a white bowl with a floating cottonwood leaf.

Crows, twigs and Abert squirrels

“Corvus” is an installation that pays homage to the dark skies of Flagstaff; it uses a circular shape of yellow pine pollen juxtaposed with the symbols of the night sky, the crow.

In “Collaborating with an Abert,” there are hundreds of thousands of what Skabelund calls “squirrel sticks,” the peeled twigs dropped by Abert squirrels as they feed above in ponderosa pine trees. This installation occupying the center of the gallery leads viewers to another installation of seven drawings titles “Remnant,” executed in charcoal, pine pollen, human hair and eraser peelings.

“Even though I came from a drawing and painting background, I rarely draw landscapes,” says Skabelund. “I use landscapes as my studio. Basically, I’m creating new landscapes with the objects I find out in the forest.”

Poignant yet passionate work

There is an educational aspect to the exhibit: Skabelund wants viewers to come away from the show having seen a form of art they rarely get to see in this region.

A group of students in ARE 432, a senior-level art education course at Northern Arizona University, roam around the center on one recent afternoon. They are the type of viewers Skabelund dreams of—those who are seeing something they haven’t seen before.

“They are aesthetic, with motifs of local pine trees, circles, bushy-tailed squirrels, ultimate lines, and the color yellow,” says senior Shantelle Kotowich about the work. “All of it is poignant yet passionate, making it an incredible visual experience for visitors of the show.”

Guiding them through the show, in addition to Skabelund, who discussed each piece, is Pam Stephens, associate professor of art education.

“I wanted them to see there’s more than Monet and Picasso, and we have living, working artists here in Flagstaff,” says Stephens, who worked with Skabelund at the university before he resigned two years ago as a half-time drawing and installation lecturer. “They need to question what this is about, and this what they do in their teaching. These are our future educators.”

Bison skulls through cornmeal

The young students from NAU also respond to the ecological aspects of the installations. “A Toll on Earth” incorporates suspended bison skulls, which slowly rotate and carve a circular trail within an 18 foot square bed of 2,000 pounds of cornmeal.

“This latest round of installations captures his interest in how humans affect and change the ecology of the earth, especially in America,” Kotowich adds.

Skabelund first created the motorized bison work in 1998, based on a photograph he saw of a manmade mountain of bison skulls outside the Detroit Carbon Works, during the time the Kosovo War was going on in Yugoslavia and Sarajevo was under siege.

“Thousands of civilians were losing their lives by sniper fire by Serb forces,” he writes in his statement for the piece. “I wondered at the time, how can such a thing happen? I remember thinking that we as a human species have become prisoners of our own history, repeating ourselves again and again.”

Meditate on beauty, destruction

“Virga” has created quite a stir at the gallery, says John Tannous, executive director at Flagstaff Cultural Partners, the nonprofit that manages the Coconino Center. “The response from the public has been incredible. We’ve not had a show that has so much enthusiastic praise in some time. People are blown away by this show and what Shawn has done with natural materials.”

At the opening reception, Bjorn Krondorfer, director of NAU’s Martin-Springer Institute, observes that Skabelund’s sculptural work has all its attention to detailed lines and shapes and circles, like three-dimensional drawing.

“And that is the beauty of this show: each piece mysteriously relates to the other, and together they present a whole that is mystical, magical, powerful, and immediately evokes an embodied response, inviting you to meditate about both the beauty of the natural world and its destruction,” Krondorfer says.

The urge to work off the paper

The innovative use of natural materials is not new to Skabelund, who was born in central Utah, but has moved around a lot.

“I’m a Forest Service brat,” he says. “My dad moved us to central Idaho so he could work on a different forest, so I grew up in McCall.”

Skabelund went to Utah State University as an undergraduate, and then to graduate school at the University of Iowa, one of the art schools in the country. There he became intrigued with drawing in a less traditional way.

“In my second year, I started working off the paper, creating drawings with three-dimensional elements extending from the picture plane,” he says. “In my third year, I started using my body; I would walk across a drawing and let my footprints do my drawing for me.”

He had his first installation art show in 1993, right after graduate school, and has had more than 30 solo shows in venues throughout the United States.