



Landscape as art studio

A new exhibit showcases an artist's vision of new landscapes, from found objects in forests.

Betsy Bruner

Shawn Skabelund throws Quetta pine needles that he collected at Dead Horse Ranch State Park into a wire containing circle as he prepares one in a series of large installations for his "Virga: The Hunt for Water" exhibition opening Sept. 17 at the Coconino Center for the Arts. Betsy Bruner/Arizona Daily Sun

The dust from pine needles filled the air low to the ground inside the darkened main gallery Tuesday afternoon at the Coconino Center for the Arts.

Shafts of light from floodlights highlighted some odd items in the room: Blackened shapes of scorched wood, several circular plywood platforms placed strategically in the room, a large wire and plastic cylinder partially filled with dried pine needles and 192 strands of filament suspended from the ceiling and tied into a vortex shape.

These forms were the beginnings of six installations that will soon recreate the artistic vision of local artist Shawn Skabelund, whose new show, "Virga: The Hunt for Water," will open to the public Tuesday, Sept. 17 at the art center.

FLAT LIKE AN ARTISAN CAKE

Skabelund, 52, was up to his elbows in pine needles as he carefully emptied 45 black plastic garbage bags of Quetta pine needles (indigenous to Afghanistan and Pakistan), which he had laboriously collected at Dead Horse Ranch State Park.

Although Damon Taylor, program coordinator at the center, was helping him, the artist was still worried about this particular installation. His plan was to empty all the contents in the bags and then remove the wire and plastic, leaving a perfect symmetrical circle of needles 54 inches in height.

“This is the one I’m most concerned about, whether it’s going to work or not,” Skabelund noted, “just because of physics, to make it free standing.”

He likened the stack to the series of paintings of haystacks by Impressionist painter Claude Monet.

“They do it with hay, so why can’t you to it with needles?” he said. “This is basically like in indoor Monet pine-needle stack.”

When all the bags are empty, Skabelund, who resigned two years ago as a half-time drawing and installation lecturer at NAU, said he hoped the top of the stack would be flat.

“I want a flat top like a big, nice artisan cake that my wife makes,” he said. “So, that’s the plan —just a very simple form, but as pure as can be. I’m a perfectionist when it comes to form.”

LONG LABOR OF LOVE

The show has been a labor of love for nine years, dating from 2003 when Skabelund was awarded an Arizona Project Grant from the Arizona Commission for the Arts for his project proposal.

The grant had initiated the original installation designs, and, after a year of intense research, Skabelund designed a series of installations based on the formal element of the circle.

The title of the grant proposal was “Virga: The Hunt for Water.” Skabelund liked the name so much that he used it for this exhibition. Virga is precipitation that evaporates before reaching the ground.

“I really liked the title and wanted to eventually use it for a show, even though only three of the installations for this exhibit relate to water,” he observed.

Also featured in other installations inside the gallery are hundreds of charred ponderosa pine logs from burnt slash pines on the Coconino National Forest, and hundreds of thousands of what Skabelund calls “squirrel sticks,” the peeled twigs dropped by Abert squirrels.

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

Each of the installations in Virga explore Skabelund's relationship to specific local ecosystems within northern Arizona. He wants viewers to come away from the exhibition seeing a form of art that they rarely get to see in this region.

A FOREST SERVICE BRAT

Skabelund was born in central Utah.

"I'm a Forest Service brat," he said. "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 as an undergraduate, and then to graduate school at the University of Iowa, one of the top art schools.

There he became intrigued with drawing in a less traditional way.

"In my second year, I started working off the paper, creating drawings with 3-dimensional elements extending from picture plane," he said. "In my third year, I started using my body; I would walk across a drawing and let my foot prints do my drawing for me."

He had his first installation art show in 1993, right after graduate school.

"I've been blessed because I've been able to exhibit so much," he added. "I have had more than 30 solo shows in venues throughout the United States."

There was an element of synchronicity to his success as an installation artist.

"It's who you know at the right time," he said.

CHANCE TO MEET ARTIST

Skabelund's wife, Alexandra Carpino, who is an art history professor at NAU and chair of the Department of Comparative Cultural Studies, said in a Facebook post that she is "excited to see what Shawn's going to do with all this stuff that's been in the garage for years."

The couple, who met in an art history class at the University of Iowa, have two children, Adrian and Chiara Rose, who study at Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy.

They will walk on stilts from their dad's studio to bring an important element in one of the installations to the center — a white aspen pole.

Skabelund will be on hand to talk about his installations Saturday night before the opening reception.