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Nature, winter's palette guide artists' project

Becky Kramer / Staff writer

If you go

"Living Within Limits: A Collaboration with Nature" runs through April 25 at the Human Rights Education Institute, 414 W. Mullan Road, Coeur d'Alene. Hours are Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

On the Web

[Listen to artist Rachel Dolezal describe the project](#)

Two artists spent four days at Lake Coeur d'Alene's Cougar Bay Preserve this winter, exploring the frozen marsh on snowshoes and creating temporary sculptures from natural items gleaned from the landscape.

"Living Within Limits: A Collaboration with Nature" was the brainchild of Rachel Dolezal, who wanted to test the idea of making art without commercial supplies.

Dolezal, a Coeur d'Alene artist who works with recycled materials, recruited sculptor-welder David Govedare, of Cheney, for the project. Over a series of snowy weekends, they created whimsical pieces from snow, downed branches and other materials they found.

Fluffy cattail heads became a parade of cautious mice, taking refuge under a rock. A nestlike stick sculpture protruded from a rocky outcropping, while a giant spiral – crafted from an abandoned hay bale – snaked across the frozen mudflats.

Shawn Gust, of Coeur d'Alene, photographed the pieces. The pictures and a video from the project are on display at the Human Rights Education Institute in Coeur d'Alene through April 25.

"It was a mind-altering journey," Dolezal said. "We were out there in the worst winter in a long time."

The project started amid blizzardlike conditions on Feb. 2. Gust wrapped his cameras in gaiters to protect them. The crew, including two assistants, kept what Dolezal calls a "ritual schedule," arriving before sunrise and leaving in darkness after a 12-hour day.

"The weather was a guiding force in what it was possible to create," Dolezal said. "Sometimes, focus is achieved when there are limitations."

Like sinking up to your waist in snow.

“We had the Mother speak to us,” said Govedare, whose American Indian-themed work includes metal sculptures of wild horses at Vantage, Wash.

Sometimes, Govedare said, the earth’s message was: You can’t go any farther. Use that perfectly good stick lying by your feet.

The season also guided the artists’ work. The thick covering of snow created a white backdrop for their work. But winter muted the color palette to the rust of dead fir needles, the icy green of moss and lichens, and the gray of granite.

Time-lapse photography in the video gives artists the appearance of busy squirrels, scurrying to create and record their work before snow sculptures toppled and the wind gusts blew away intricate mosaics.

It speaks to the ephemeral nature of the art, said Charles Miller, a classical guitarist who composed the music that accompanies the video.

“Impermanence is rooted in the artwork,” Miller said. “You see them in the moment, and you see them disappear.”

Dolezal and Govedare drew inspiration from British artist Andy Goldsworthy, who uses natural materials to create temporary landscape sculptures. They went one step further, working without manmade tools. That meant relying on teeth and fingers, and baring hands to freezing temperatures, Dolezal said.

A contract with the Nature Conservancy, which manages the 88-acre Cougar Bay Preserve, also stipulated that the artists not remove live tree branches.

The result is “no-impact” art, which will decay and disband naturally, Dolezal said. For one project, she collected lichen and created a 10-foot rope that draped over a vine. Something has been nibbling at it.

“For a deer, this would be the find of a lifetime,” Dolezal said.

The \$8,000 project was funded by the Margaret W. Reed Foundation. Proceeds from the sale of a \$10 DVD of the project will go toward another installment of “Living Within Limits” at Cougar Bay. The artists hope to re-create the project in each season.

At the exhibit’s opening reception last week, Govedare urged viewers to experiment with their own natural art, creating pieces that “rise up like a fish jumping” and disappear just as quickly.

It’s one way to bless the earth for its beauty, he said.

“Every one of us,” Govedare said, “has the opportunity to be surrounded by the universe.”

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