



NEWS

SAU professors fuse digital, studio art and nature

Misty Sunrise by Rhaelene Lowther, Watercolor on aquaboard, 9×12. Image depicts a scene from the Farm Road on Southern Arkansas University's campus, Magnolia, Arkansas.

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MAGNOLIA, Ark. (KTAL/KMSS) – When classes first went online after the Covid pandemic began, art professors [Anna Zusman](#) and [Rhaelene Lowther](#) at Southern Arkansas University in Magnolia were discussing nature on a morning walk when they discovered they did not have the same artistic viewpoint concerning a mushroom covered in slugs.

Their differing viewpoints, discovered on pandemic-era nature walks, are soon to be presented to the public in a joint show at the [Texarkana Regional Arts & Humanities Council](#). The show, called “Quotidian Moments through Different Lenses,” is scheduled to run from late September through the end of October.

Southern Arkansas University’s Farm Road, where Zusman and Lowther’s walks still take place, is a scenic, paved path, approximately 2 ½ miles long, that passes a barn and a duck pond. The road is well-known by both SAU students and members of the Magnolia community.

Zusman, who teaches Drawing, Concept Art, Illustration, Pen and Ink, Zines, Advanced Art Studio, and Capstone, for SAU, was first inspired to paint a piece she called “Alice 2020” which features Alice wearing a Covid mask.

The piece is “very pandemic influenced,” said [Zusman](#). “She (Alice) is just kind of moving away from the slug who is offering all these goodies.”

[Lowther](#), whose classes at SAU are focused on artwork for video games, digital simulation and animation, helped Zusman with 3D modeling for the Alice 2020 piece. Lowther instructs students in 3D Modeling, 2D animation, 3D animation, Character Design and Sculpture (digital), Rigging (preparing a character for animation) and Simulation Design.

“When the pandemic began, we started walking every day,” Zusman told KTAL NBC News 6. “We started noticing all kinds of things, like animals, insects, cycles of nature, colors, textures, and we were constantly talking about that.”

Lowther said because the two, who are obvious friends, had a lot of overlap in students, they would talk about ways they could engage them. “If you pay attention to everything you see (on the walks),” she said, “it’s hard. Both of us would notice something interesting, and we’d start to imagine what we’d do with that. We had very different perspectives.”

Lowther said the thing that kicked off the project idea was “to create a body of work where we use the same exact inspiration from these walks and create artworks based off of it.”



Rhodelene Lowther, Dead Crawfish, Watercolor on aquaboard, 6x8"

Anna Zusman, Tea Time, Digital drawing printed on archival paper, 15x11"

Lowther's watercolor on aquaboard *Crawfish* on left and Zusman's digital drawing on right, printed on archival paper

The two professors did begin creating a body of artistic works based on their nature walks, and they also began inviting their students and other artists to join them on the walks and to produce their own artworks, too.

“Working this way was a revelation. Neither one of us have problems with artist block since we started walking. If anything, it's the opposite problem,” said Zusman.

“If you've walked the Farm Road, you know that you see a lot of... the life cycle. The bird happened in the snow story of January or

February of 2021. We saw at least four birds that had died during that snowstorm. The one that we both liked, and by like I mean we thought was visually interesting, and conceptually interesting, and also just felt really tragic, was a bird that didn't look injured in any way. It just looked perfect, but perfectly frozen in the snow. We immediately both knew that it was one of the pieces we both wanted to work on.”

“We almost have too many ideas. If you look at our work, you see that we interpret the same things in completely different ways. It's just being open to a new experience and to finding things exciting. I tell students that it's not *something* that's exciting, it's an honest eye that *makes* it so,” said Zusman.

Zusman said the reason the show in Texarkana is important is that “art, a lot of times, is not a big part of people's lives. They can begin to question whether they themselves have a completely different way of looking at things.”



Original Photograph

Rhodelene Lowther, Live Crawfish, Watercolor on Aquaboard, 6x8"

Anna Zusman, Crawfish Mermaid, Digital drawing printed on archival paper, 14x16"

The original photograph taken during a nature walk, shown on the far left, Lowther's painting at center, and Zusman's digital drawing printed on archival paper on right, clearly show the different interpretations the two artists take when approach a subject.

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I began to notice masks on the ground shortly after the pandemic started. I found them along pathways, in parking lots, in grassy fields, and front of homes,” wrote Lowther of her *Lost or Discarded* show, which will be on display at SAU's Brinson Art Gallery from October 20-31. “I thought I could easily paint a small watercolor a day of each of the masks. However, after a time, I became overwhelmed by the number of masks and by the emotional weariness of the ongoing pandemic that felt like it would not end. I kept collecting photos and sometimes masks and thought I might return to painting these small reminders of the big changes in the world. Instead, I made a shift from daily documentation to creating more involved pieces that deal with our ongoing engagement with the pandemic, one another, and the world we inhabit.”

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is just one more checkbox to check off. They're starting to see weird things they might not otherwise have noticed. We're hoping long term we'll start to reap the rewards of that with more students, and one day maybe more students will join us."

The professors say it is important to incorporate the actual world into virtual worlds. They include such assignments in their classes to try to encourage an expanded worldview.

"Any artist that wants to join us, we are open to doing more collaborative pieces with other artists, too," said Zusman. "The important thing is that all of us have the experience together. We take a walk and discuss how we see the world."

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