

Professors, artist create pieces from fossils

By THADDEUS MAST

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A group of professors and an artist are bringing plants millions of years old to life.

Science Loves Art started about a year ago by winning a Biodiversity in Art Grant from the UW Biodiversity Institute. Artist René Williams and four UW employees — Ellen Currano and Cynthia Weinig from the biology department, Williams Conservatory Coordinator Meredith Pratt and Geological Museum Collections Manager Laura Vietti — decided to merge the sometimes independent worlds of science and art, Williams said.

“Everyone talks about science and art as separate things,” she said. “Between us, we decided to see if we could formally make a connection between these two.”

The group of friends came up with the idea from separate sides of the table. Williams looked at it from an artist’s point of view.

“I’m inspired by plants,” she said. “I’ve learned that, I might be inspired by looking at plants, the textures, the colors — but to learn why it is this color, or why it has this texture — it means so much more and lets you incorporate much more into your art than just being inspired by the color purple.”

On the other hand, Currano wanted to get the word out about the uniqueness of Wyoming fossils.

“One of our big goals is the outreach,” she said. “I think one of the amazing things about Wyoming that a lot of people don’t know is that we have one of the best fossil records in the world. It can be a real source of state pride.”

The art initially started with plant rubbings, Williams said. The plants are based on fossil records of what actually grew in Wyoming millions of years ago.

“It sounds simple, but we turned it into an artistic show,” she said.

The show grew to integrating glasswork, where they take plants and infuse them in pieces of glass, Currano said.



Bringing the past to life

René Williams, Ellen Currano, Laura Vietti and Meredith Pratt stand in front of their Science Loves Art exhibit Friday in the University of Wyoming Berry Biodiversity Conservation Center Lobby. JEREMY MARTIN/Boomerang photographer

“You have sheets of glass and we’ve taken actual plants, coated them with glue and glass powdered glass, put them on the colored glass plate and put them in the kiln,” she said.

“The plant burns away, but you’re left with this glass imprint. It’s an analogy to how fossils form.”

The art is not made only by the five women in the group — many UW professors joined in.

“We made these beautiful glass pieces that look like fossils — glass fossils,” Williams said. “All these scientists came into my studio over the last six months where they would just play with art. We worked with plaster, concrete, glass — we always had plants around, and we finally figured out this glass technique. There are 39 of these pieces, and most of them are artwork the scientists have made.”

A collaborative mural is one of the show’s centerpieces, Williams said.

“We’ve made two pieces out of huge plants from the Williams Conservatory through printing and pressing and we made a 15 foot mural,” she said. “We practiced different techniques, and it turned out great.”

While the art turned out perfectly, Currano said it means more than first glance.

“It represents plant evolution through time,” she said. “The bottom of the mural is 450 million years ago, when you have the earliest plants, and you go up through time until you get to the modern time at the top.”

The art exhibit reception Friday will have interactive pieces, Williams said — everyone will have the chance to make plant rubbings, and a special children’s area will be set up with plant mold making as well.

Different groups and events have asked Science Loves Art to attend summer shows, Williams said, while they prepare for their own plans for the school year and bringing some of their ideas to the classroom.

“We’re getting ready to put together our school kits,” she said. “We’re contacting art teachers around the state, and we’re just starting to do that.”