

Sustainability Spotlight: School of the Arts

By Melyssa Allen

Meredith's "Sustaining Our Environment" campus theme has inspired several projects in the School of the Arts this semester. From theatre and dance performances to visual arts exhibitions, the School of the Arts is bringing attention to sustainability issues in a variety of ways.

Dean of the School of the Arts Rebecca Bailey believes the arts can transform facts about sustaining the earth into very immediate and personal experiences for the observer.

"Through multi-sensory involvement, a deep, emotional connection can be formed that goes far beyond comprehension of data," Bailey said. "Seeing a glacier in a photograph and understanding that, as massive as it appears, it is in danger of disappearing in a very few years has so much more impact than reading that 'glaciers are shrinking.'"

Visual Arts

In visual arts, a featured exhibition this fall has been "The Thirsty Earth," showcasing images taken by retired Professor of Biology Janice Swab during her travels around the world. The photographs illustrate how water's presence and absence affect plant life, animal life and the tender skin of the planet itself. The exhibition, which includes photographs from China, Antarctica, Africa and other locations, closes on November 16.

Another exhibition of Swab's work is now on display in the Science and Mathematics Building until February. "Snapshots in Time" includes photographs and artifacts that help the view gain insights into the relationship man has with the earth in countries around the world. It includes examples of how that relationship can be symbiotic and have relatively little impact on the ecosystem over time, such as in Belize, or effect rapid, overwhelming change, like the industrialization of China.

Additional exhibitions in the spring will also feature sustainability-inspired art. A show called "Darwin's Journey," will open on February 12, 2009, the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth. Evolution, and evolutionary dead ends created by climate change, conflict and other stressors, also relate to the theme.

School of the Arts Dean Becky Bailey and Departmental Assistant Karen Sampson are working with Janice Swab to create this exhibit, which will be based on original photographs, reproductions of archival material and artifacts collected by Swab in her efforts to retrace Darwin's journey.

“Visualizing Environmental Interaction” will be a multi-disciplinary exhibition by Meredith students and faculty will be on view February 1–April 6, 2009, in the Frankie G. Weems Art Gallery as well as across campus, inside and outside. In videos, sculptures, graphics, electronic media, and interactive and site specific installations, students will illustrate some of the complex sustainability issues. The exhibition will include independently created works and concepts developed by design teams.

“The works will address topics such as the volume of trash found on the Meredith campus, comparison of energy consumed in our living quarters with those in other parts of the world, spiritual influences of the environment as well as its decay and destruction, the energy economics of food and personal responsibility in contributing to the planet's well being among others,” Meredith Gallery Director Ann Roth said.

Students in Associate Professor of Art Lisa Pearce’s class are among those who are creating design proposals for the sustainability-themed exhibition. Her 3-D design students are using the three Rs—reduce, reuse and recycle as the focus of their concept.

Pearce’s students are also working on projects using a reed from Indonesia that is a fast-growing renewable resource.

“What’s really beautiful about these designs are that the reed is covered with paper with a lighting system inside to use ‘light’ as an element of design much like line and color are used,” Pearce said.

Dance

Meredith’s dance program is using the sustainability theme to help shape performances this semester. Carol Finley’s Dance Repertory is focusing on the topic in a way that is meant to raise student awareness of the issue. The piece is to be performed during the Meredith Dance Theatre concert, November 21-23.

Finley said the class “is exploring our impact as humans on the earth ... we started by calculating our carbon footprints and have continued by creating material that physically explores strong versus light impact on the floor, in the air, on each other.”

Talani Torres has asked students in her Dance in Society course to research an environmental issue for their group projects. They will be making poster presentations and creating site specific dance art to represent issues such as

deforestation, recycling and water conservation. The projects will culminate in dance performances presented across campus.

Theatre

Theatre students have written a children's play with an environmental theme, called "The Day the Trash Talked Back." It will be performed on Tuesday, Dec. 9, at 2 p.m. in the Studio Theatre. The show is free.

The faculty and staff of Meredith's School of the Arts are using their artistic work to increase environmental awareness in the local community.

"By approaching linked environmental and societal issues through the arts, we hope to fully awaken the viewer to the crisis that our planet is facing," Bailey said.

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