Pictures at an Exhibition

Fuji did not stand alone as one of the mesmerizing sights in "Views of Land and Place," a student-produced exhibition at SU's Lowe Art Gallery. In fact, Fujiyama: First Light of the Sun—a color woodcut created by Japanese artist Hiroshi Yoshida in 1926—was one of the show's nearly 120 pieces of landscape art, ranging from Salvador Dali's Tree to Robert A. Widdicombe's color photograph of Cadillac Ranch in Texas.

Bringing such a display of artistry together was not an easy assignment, but it's exactly what a handful of graduate students accomplished under the guidance of College of Visual and Performing Arts Professor Edward A. Aiken, chair of the School of Art and Design's Graduate Program in Museum Studies and gallery director. "The exhibition is the heart and soul of the Advanced Curatorship class," Aiken says. "Each year's exhibition is special and developed in its own way. It's always an adventure because the works of art are different, the aim of the show is different, and the nature of the students is different."

This show, funded in part by a Faculty Instructional Grant, was designed for broad appeal, cutting across media, historical periods, styles, and both original and mass-produced print art. "We wanted to provide an explosive notion of landscape," Aiken says. "Of course, the relationship between landscape and place is a close one—they're not the same concept, but they overlap and feed each other."

Aiken began the process last spring, combing through thousands of images from the University’s Art Collection, Department of Special Collections, and Light Work, as well as the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry’s Moon Library. He narrowed the selection to several hundred. Then the students took over. "It's really hard deciding on works, because everyone has personal tastes and an opinion about what they think would be the best," says Museum Studies graduate student Jennifer Hunt '98. "There's a lot of compromising."

There were also lessons in teamwork, patience, and completing a project under deadline pressure. The students drew on their individual talents and experiences and worked in teams to create the exhibition's documentation, design, and presentation. They researched the art, wrote labels, and produced a brochure and evaluation survey. They consulted with professor and landscape artist Sarah McCoubrey. They arranged and rearranged, working with Practicum I students who assisted with matting, setting up and painting the display walls, and finally installing the pieces. "There's a ton of logistical planning involved," says gallery preparator and registrar Bradley Hudson, who teaches the practicum class. "Doing the design work is a great learning experience for the students."

The exhibition drew 1,203 visitors, including 300 students from seven classes. Among them were 200 students from Professor Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn's American history class. Their assignment: Write about three works, including one that reminded them of novelist Willa Cather's My Antonia and its vivid images of the Nebraska prairie during pioneer days. "The exhibition was very much oriented around what I focused on in the course," Lasch-Quinn says. "Place has such a hold over people, how their lives are played out, and how history unfolds."

Says Hunt: "It's the greatest feeling when the doors are open and the exhibition is ready for the public to come in and see."