

Bittle diorama shows Marfa as it was, maybe

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THE BIG BEND *Sentinel*



Joanne Bittle stands beside a diorama built into the back of a U-Haul trailer (staff photo by FRED COVARRUBIAS Jr.)

By STERRY BUTCHER

MARFA – Joanne Bittle's show at the Eugene Binder gallery is old school Marfa. Like, really old school, back before there were hipsters at the laundromat or the funeral home became a dancehall, before ranchers drank coffee at the Thunderbird or pilots learned to fly at the Army air base and even before Spanish missionaries came and the Jumanos painted hash-marks on cave walls.

"This is what the area might've looked like 250-290 million years ago in the Permian Period

when the region was covered by a shallow sea," the artist said as she gestured at the diorama in front of her.

Built neatly into the back of a U-Haul trailer is a classic diorama tableau: strange proto-shrimp looking creatures, yellow sea sponges, barnacles, red tube-like worms, sea urchins, coral. It looks like something out of a sixth grade field trip to a natural history museum, which makes sense, since Bittle has quite possibly the coolest job ever. She's among the team members who create dioramas for the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

"People love dioramas," she acknowledged. "They get emotional about them. It has something to do with making the real non-real."

Bittle grew up in the Midwest and moved to New York after college, where she worked in the fast-paced, high-end world of Christie's auction house. After 9/11, she began volunteering at the natural history museum and eventually joined the museum staff in administrative and education roles. When a preparator opportunity opened, she jumped at it.

"Working with the scientists is fascinating," she said. "They know so much but then how do you see it in front of you? There's a translation of the facts the scientist knows and how it is perceived."

Bittle's paintings of jackrabbits and insects had graced the Binder gallery walls several times. She started thinking about a diorama of the area about a year ago and prepared for it by amassing a catalogue of background material and research. The resulting diorama is somewhere between fact and fiction. Nothing in the piece looks unscientific or decorative – it all looks like real stuff that actually existed, and a lot of it is.

"For that trilobite, I casted a real trilobite and modeled a head using a shark's tooth and a squid spine as its tail," she said. "We'd never put that at the museum – we wouldn't have put shark's teeth in its head."

The difference between her day job at the museum and her art is the freedom to make whatever she thinks will suit her work. The history museum requires scientific rigor and as much accuracy as possible. But if she wants to dust her Permian Basin diorama with sparkling iron pyrite, she can.

"I was in control of the design," said Bittle. "I casted, I modeled and painted and figured angles, designed the catalogue. My art is the decision-making in the process and the studio. It's a collage of past and present."

Along with the diorama is Bittle's painting of a kingfisher, the catalogue she made and assorted jars of striped bark scorpions.

Join Bittle from 9-11pm Friday when her show "Preserving Mass Extinction: A Portable Landscape" opens with a reception at the gallery, 218 N. Highland.