



Staff photo by Frank

JOINED EFFORT — Northampton artists Lydia Nettler (in background at left) and Harriet Diamond have created their "River P" installation for the "Art Scene" exhibition series at the Quadrangle

Life's journey shared in 'River Passage'

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By GLORIA RUSSELL

An environment at once site-specific and universal has been created for "River Passage," which combines Lydia Nettler's large-scale charcoal drawings and Harriet Diamond's life-size papier-mache figures and rocks in a single installation. The exhibit opens today at the George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum.

The setting, as described in the Nettler drawings, is a river and forest landscape.

Papier-mache boulders and real gravel act to bring the imagery of the two-dimensional drawings into the real space of the room. The eight human figures and one dog, all papier-mache too, lie on the gravel riverbank or climb over the rocks or dive toward the painted water.

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That's the whole exhibition: one big, recognizable scene from nature translated into art and brought indoors.

And in one sense, that is enough. It is pleasant and familiar, non-threatening, a pastorate without the pasture.

However, that initial effect is only part of the meaning of this work. For at heart, the passage in the title is that of life and experience.

And although the central theme is a broad one, there are a number of subthemes based on particular issues.

One, the artists' relationship, is expressed in Diamond's well-known figure group "Pulling Together," which introduces the installation.

With this group from their first collaboration in 1988, Diamond portrayed herself and Nettler as they strode together, deep in earnest conversation. Depicting a typical meeting, when they were beginning to discover their mutual interests, she summarized the eagerness and intensity of their exchanges.

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Reappearing in "River Passage" as the women reclining on the riverbank, they seem easier now, quieter in their interaction. And the baby they pulled in a stroller at the beginning of their friendship has grown into a young child who plays with other chil-

dren among the rocks.

That evidence of the stages of life, manifest in figures personifying the two artists, young children, a pregnant woman and finally, an elderly woman, establishes two related minor themes.

One, apparent in the span of ages, concerns the life cycle from birth to old age. The second is less obvious, considering as it does the creativity of women, depicting them as artists or mothers; even the old woman dives confidently into the river.

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Nettler's drawings of forest and river bed, monumental in scale, are representational at the outset, with trees, paths, river, rocks and banks, even swimmers reproduced with visual fidelity.



Underlying this passage from realism to abstraction is the artists' conviction that human beings have the potential to transcend their daily lives, especially in nature.



But eventually these elements lose their identifiable quality and become abstract swirling zones of light and dark, just water and rocks.

At the beginning, as the artists envision it, the natural scene is readable and filled with people; in the final segment of the installation the pictorial element is less familiar and people are evident only in their handiwork, in this case a raked Japanese garden.

And this course through the installation, from the specific to the abstract, becomes a journey for the audience, a progression in time as well as space.

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their daily lives, especially in nature. And therefore the river serves as metaphor for journeys of the spirit.

Diamond and Nettler, in their own collaborative journey of the spirit, have had to learn to work together, to trust each other's instincts.

After encouraging each other in the initial stages — creating ideas, plans, directions — they lately have begun to share in the actual making process. In this case Nettler built some rocks; Diamond painted some marks.

But they can never take their collaboration for granted. Their individual work is too different, in materials and in purpose.

Nettler takes nature as her subject, whether in these powerful black-and-white drawings or in her colorful, textured abstract paintings.

And Diamond constructs (from newspaper that is always visible) very realistic people who wear jeans, sit at kitchen tables, riding big plastic tricycles.

Nettler aims to extract from nature that which is inexpressible in it, the mystery of it. Diamond uses the particulars, the commonplace details of human life in ordinary settings as a way to get at universal meanings.

Such disparate approaches cause us to ask whether their collaboration succeeds. It is tempting to see the work, in truth, as separate entities, sculpture and draw-

ing, arranged together but still unrelated.

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Yet somehow these installation do make sense in terms that are visual as well as subliminal. May be that is because the artists say so; they take a bold stance and speak in a unified voice.

Perhaps it is because they balance each other. Diamond's people and dogs and cats and kitchen tables, even the much more generalized nudes in this "River Passage," speak to us of the facts and the joys of human life.

Nettler's landscapes, regions of light and line and shadow, with or without figures, draw us into a realm beyond the physical, where we lose ourselves.

I see the conjunction in this relationship as one of body and spirit as explored in terms of art. Or perhaps we might think of it as observation and meditation on the layers and levels of the human heart.

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The exhibition, on view through Feb. 10, opens with a reception and a chance to meet the artists this afternoon from 4 to 6.

Regular hours at the museum are noon to 4 p.m. Thursday through Sunday.

The exhibit is part of "Art Scene: Hampden, Hampshire, and Franklin Counties," an ongoing series that brings into the Springfield art museums the work of regional professional artists. It is sponsored by The Springfield Union-News and Sunday Republican.