

Life's essentially ephemeral nature is Cheri Ibes' subject

'PROCESS PIECE'

BY KATE MCGRAW
For the Journal

OK, you're an installation artist, which means you create non-archival art (not meant to last) in installations depicting ideas or subjects. For this, naturally, you need a little room. Installations are unconventional in intent, but the genre has its own conventions and one of them is that installations are not only site-specific but generally large in scale. They tend to sprawl a little. You even had your own gallery in Benicia, Calif., and you were director of the Block Gallery in downtown Sacramento. Both venues presented installation and new media works. Block was a yearlong experiment in site-specific installation and an inquiry into the space where the boundaries between place and art have disappeared. It was a place where viewers could begin to understand what installation art is.

But now you're in Santa Fe and you've been offered a solo show — at Axle Contemporary, the mobile art gallery Jerry Wellman and Matthew Chase Daniel created out of a 1970 Chevy all-aluminum step van in 2011. How do you create a site-specific installation in a medium-size (18-foot-long, 7-foot-wide) vehicle that began its life as a Hostess Twinkies delivery van?

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If you go

WHAT: "Cold Storage," mixed media installation by Cheri Ibes.

WHEN: Today through Feb. 11; reception 6-8 p.m. today.

WHERE: Axle Contemporary mobile art gallery, at Rallyard Plaza

CONTACT: 505-670-5854



COURTESY OF AXLE
CONTEMPORARY

A detail view shows elements of "Cold Storage," Cheri Ibes' installation of ice, industrial shelving and plastic bottles, which opens today in Axle Contemporary's mobile gallery at Rallyard Plaza.

Life's Essentially Ephemeral Nature Is Exhibit Subject

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"Believe me, I thought about that a lot," artist Cheri Ibes said. Ibes is opening her solo show at Axle today. It will be parked at the Railyard Plaza for the opening. "It has been really challenging. The thing about Axle is, it is an artwork itself. So I knew that in some way I had to incorporate the vehicle itself. And I thought of a mobile cold storage van. I just whitened out all the background inside with translucent sheeting, to create a frosty cold feeling. Then I put in warehouse shelving units. There are custom-made acrylic units. The art pieces are of pieces of ice, real ice, with various things frozen into them. When they melt, there are trays that collect the water, and it can be reused to make more pieces."

"Cold Storage" opens today, and visitors are urged to get there early and stay late to see the art frozen and, um, melting. Ibes prepared a brief artist's statement about the work.

"Warning: (her statement says) This work is non-archival. It doesn't even exist in a solid state for long and it is constantly changing. You cannot come back in 10 minutes and see the same work of art. That work will no longer exist."

"It's really a process piece,"



COURTESY OF AXLE CONTEMPORARY

Some elements appear as others disappear in Cheri Ibes' ever-changing piece "Cold Storage," an installation of ice, industrial shelving and plastic bottles opening today in Axle Contemporary's mobile gallery at the Railyard Plaza.

she explained. "The thing is melting every minute. It's very much an 'every moment counts' kind of piece. It's art that is changing form as you look at it. It is strictly non-archival artwork and I guess that's kind of subversive — subversive of people's expectations and assumptions about what art is."

Ibes is intent on the essentially ephemeral qualities of life. "My work seeks to

bridge the chasm between the human constructed world and the natural environment. Toward this objective, I reconfigure familiar objects such as balloons, light bulbs and garden hose, transforming them into beautiful and absurd simulacrum suggestive of elemental plant and animal life," she said in an emailed statement.

Wellman and Daniel are excited and intrigued by

what Ibes has created. "A site-specific mixed-media with ice installation to be installed in Axle Contemporary on Jan. 11, 2013," is how they described it. The exhibit, if that's the word, will remain in the van until Feb. 11, assuming Ibes, who has a day job as a rehab therapist, can keep up with the constant need for new ice pieces.

"In this installation,"

Daniel said, "the Axle step van is imagined as a mobile cold storage unit in which the viewer is invited to look inside through the rear window to witness snapshots of a process. Using ice constructs and discarded water bottles, the installation sets in motion a time-lapse performance piece in which one group of objects is revealed by the disappearance of the other. It is a performance conceived as a non-technological time-lapse work demonstrating two paradoxes: 1) appearance arising out of disappearance and 2) the apparent ability of ephemeral processes to expand time."

A native of the Dakotas

You don't want to call Cheri Ibes a late bloomer just because she's having her latest solo art exhibition at age 65. That would be ridiculous. She's been blooming all along. She grew up on a farm in North Dakota and always drew and made little sculptures. But "art just isn't considered a viable career" where she grew up, she said.

She graduated with a science degree from the University of California at Davis and was walking across the campus after graduation when she wandered by the art department and saw sculptures by Robert

Arneson. With a pang, she thought, "But this is what I wanted to do."

Ibes turned around and enrolled in sculpture classes. She had a formidable platoon of teachers: Arneson, Manuel Neri and Lucy Puls. She directed the galleries referenced above. And she became a well-known installation artist.

Living in Northern California, she decided she wanted to be somewhere that art was honored. And somewhere she could be close to nature. She began Googling "medium-sized town." "Medium-size town with art scene and access to nature."

"Google is pretty smart," she said. "Santa Fe kept coming up."

Two and a half years ago, she moved here.

"It's wonderful," she said. "In California, I'd go to the hardware store and say, 'I need such and such' and they'd say, 'What do you want to use it for?' and I'd say, 'Well, I'm making an art piece' and they'd back away. I learned to say, 'You don't really want to know.'"

"In Santa Fe, I say, 'Well, I'm making an art piece' and the hardware store clerks say, 'Yeah? Sounds interesting.' Everybody makes art here."