

Photographers' work true labor of love

They lug heavy cameras into wilderness areas.

BY STEVE BENNETT
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Carra Garza and Vincent Mariano have been friends for a decade, photography buddies who lug large-format cameras out into the wilderness, Ansel Adams-style, to get that pristine, perfect shot of a panoramic landscape or the veins in an oak leaf.

They have logged lens time together in natural preserves all over Texas, waking before dawn to catch the good light. They have an easy rapport.

"Carra is a real rarity," says Mariano, who is on the board of trustees of the Southwest School of Art, where Garza earned her certificate in photography. "Not many women pack a large camera and trek through the backwoods."

"It is mostly a guy thing," the petite Garza acknowledges.

For the past year and a half, these two San Antonio photographers have focused on a small piece of wilderness, about 50 acres of springs, creeks and forests, right in our own backyard: the headwaters of the San Antonio River on the campus of the University of the Incarnate Word. The Blue Hole, not so blue right now because of the deepening drought, is where our city's namesake river begins — and not a lot of us are aware that you can just walk up and peer into a well that represents the source of a river that flows all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.

"They wanted to know the place more intimately and to lift it up for others to see," Helen Belew, director of the Headwaters Coalition, says of the photographers.

When the project began, the natural springs were "plentiful and mysterious," Garza and Mariano

say in their artists' statement; but until it rains, there is dry riverbed. It's not a happy sight.

And yet "Brigid's Garden: Photographs from the Blue Hole and Beyond," a collection of 30 16-by-20-inch silver gelatin black-and-white prints, shot and developed the old-fashioned way — we're talking 19th-century pioneers like Henry Fox Talbot here — ultimately reflects hope.

The exhibit is part of San Antonio's monthlong Fotoseptiembre celebration.

"The nuns preserve this land," Garza said during a recent interview, "and in many ways what we were trying to do is to make a tribute to the nuns."

In some respects, the process is as important as the image, with respect being a key word.

"It's not real spontaneous," Garza says.

"One image can take 20 minutes to set up and shoot," Mariano says.

"You have to be really committed to the image," Garza adds, finishing the thought.

Carrying a heavy box camera — Garza's is a Wisner wooden field camera that she refers to as a "Chinese box"; Mariano shoots an Ebony, "originally made with ebony wood, but now made from mahogany" — out into the wild, setting it up on a tripod, waiting for the light to be just right, shadows to fade or deepen, the wind to die down and the spirits to align, is akin to plein air painting. And if Mariano has bellows envy — and Garza's Wisner does extend further — then she probably sometimes would prefer the relative ease and simplicity of Mariano's Ebony. Either way, both cameras are beautiful works of art in themselves. There is an element of commitment here that one doesn't find with a digital point-and-shoot, much less a phone camera.



COURTESY VINCENT MARIANO

Vincent Mariano's "Springtime" is featured in the Fotoseptiembre exhibition "Brigid's Garden," which runs through Oct. 1 at the University of the Incarnate Word.



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Photographers Carra Garza and Vincent Mariano, shown at the Blue Hole on the UIW campus, use heavy, large-format cameras to record scenes of nature.

"There is a sort of romance in these images," says Mariano, who tends to look for wider shots of the river and the surrounding flora such as "Springtime," rooting out the essential relationship between the water — shimmering and reflective — and the land. His images are a bit brighter and starker than Garza's.

Garza, who specializes in still lifes when she's in the studio, shoots closer up, carefully framing an intimate composition of intersecting twigs, leaves floating on the surface of the water in the background of "Curtain." Her images are warmer.

Both photographers' work in "Brigid's Garden" is stunning. Out of 165 negatives, each has 15 images in the show, and after a while, a visitor can begin to pick out who shot what. In any case, the exhibition is a powerful homage to an area where people have gathered for 12,000 years and to the sisters who preserve and maintain it. There is awe and deference in these images, reverence as well as a sense of adventure.

"We have different ways of seeing," Garza says. "And when we're out in the field, we don't go together. He goes his way and I go mine. But in some



COURTESY CARRA GARZA

"Brigid's Shrine," a photo by Carra Garza, is featured in the exhibition "Brigid's Garden" in the Semmes Gallery at UIW.

ways, this is a dialogue between two people."

If there is one image that stands out, it is "Brigid's Shrine," from which the exhibition got its name and which Garza shot in a complicated 20-minute exposure with extended bellows and a filter.

The resulting image is full of mystery: A wooden panel — "It's sort of like an altar panel," Garza says — has been positioned with care in a hole in the trunk of a huge live oak, with symbols of fire, a Celtic cross and writing (the term "Naoimh Bhríd") painted on the board. Adjacent to the tree is a circular maze of sorts, kind of like Stonehenge, that Mariano captured in "Rock Circles."

Located near the UIW baseball field on Brigid's Path, it is an obviously well-maintained shrine to St. Brigid of Kildare (an Irish spelling: Naomh Bríd), circa 451-525, one of Ireland's patron saints along with Patrick and Columba.

"We wanted to give context to what we were photographing, and you could look at many of these images and they could be anywhere, which is sort of the point. But we also wanted to show that this was a special place," Garza says. "And we found what we interpreted to be markers that would identify this place. I can't tell you why they are there, but they are there for a reason."

"It's interesting that in all the time we were out there, the only time we ever ran into any nuns, both times it was early in the morning and it was in that area. There some element of mystery to that."

"Brigid's Garden" continues through Oct. 1 in the Semmes Gallery on the University of the Incarnate Word campus, 4301 Broadway. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to Friday. For more information, call 210-829-6000. Individual photographs are available for \$650, with a portion of sales benefiting the Headwaters Coalition.