STEPPIN' OUT

Squidge Liljeblad Davis.

PEACE like a river... and a thicket

Monroe artist Squidge Liljeblad Davis has created a 'shrine' at Unity College

BY TOM GROENING

Photos by Jennifer Thorburn

I'm well into Monday morning high gear as photographer Jennifer Thorburn and I tear into the Unity College parking lot, late for an appointment with teacher and artist Squidge Liljeblad Davis.

Davis' installation, *The River and The Thicket: A Shrine to Eros* — an art show which literally takes over a gallery — has been getting good word of mouth, as they say, and even garnered a glowing review in the *Maine Sunday Telegram*.

As we enter the gallery, which is lit ever so softly, I train my reporter's eye onto this tall ceramic figure, then onto that one, notebook in hand, ready to fire away with questions.

"No," says Davis. "You need to put your things down and just move around quietly. I'll be in my office across the hall."

Hmm. But that is what we do, Jen moving one way and me the other, weaving our way through the clay creatures that stand as tall as me, the tree saplings — more than 50, Davis tells me later — and small printed cards on the walls that describe the seasons to which they relate. My heart rate and blood pressure drop. I let my mind hold and feel the images of winter, spring, summer and autumn that come from the words printed on the cards, the soft colors and textures of the work, and the rhythms of the flow of this remarkable space.

To read one of the cards, I must lean forward, and a sapling branch presses against my forehead. It feels good, and I let it remain there as I read.

When Davis returns, we draw up two ceramic "stones," and sit on the floor to talk. I am now using hushed tones, just barely audible above the plip-plopping of a sort of fountain in the center of the gallery.

"Our culture wants to insulate itself, so you can pass through unscathed," Davis explains, describing the traditional relationship between art and a visitor to a gallery. My contact with the saplings was by design, she explains, as she planned for people to become ensnared, literally and figuratively, with these natural shapes and forms.

At the opening last month, the small room was packed, Davis relates, yet silence ruled, as our subdued tones do today.

"It's a shrine," she says, and like those that can be found in the East, the purpose of this installation is "to stop and absorb."

And there is a lot to absorb. But how to describe it?

To lapse back into my linear, Western self, I must relate that the installation is laid out to evoke the flow of the seasons.

In the winter "corner" of the gallery, a beautiful, dark archway is set in and among the saplings. In the center of the room is a shrine within the shrine, a space delineated by saplings and a wooded archway through which one must duck to enter. Inside, the floor is covered with wood chips, while at the center is the fountain, a pool that keeps replenishing from droplets that fall from a tube hidden in the branches. Two blocks of wood are in the back corners, perfect for sitting and... absorbing.

The tall, ceramic creatures throughout, both human and animal, speak volumes as they emerge from the shadows.

"Each one describes the seasons," she says of the figures. "The words," printed on the cards, "are like a whisper."

Everywhere are snakes — on the floor, crawling up the walls and trees.

In the "autumn" end of the room is another arched ceramic construction that, had it been in

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