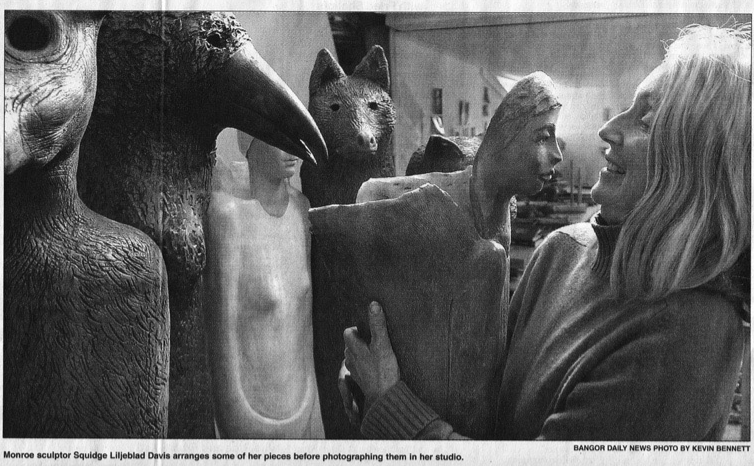
Artist Davis draws inspiration from haunting images of nature



BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY KEVIN BENNETT

Monroe sculptor Squidge Liljeblad Davis arranges some of her pieces before photographing them in her studio.

BACK TO THE LAND

By Walter Griffin
Of the NEWS Staff

The images spring from the earth. Gnarled trees, slithering snakes, ebony crows, wolves, deer and bear. They evoke a feeling of mystery and darkness. Even the angels seem far removed from heaven.

The sculptures and drawings of Monroe artist Squidge Liljeblad Davis are stark and evocative. They are created to reach into the soul, their haunting spirits drawn from the arching hills and dank woods that surround her studio. For 30 years, Liljeblad Davis has walked that land, reached into the trees and scratched its soil.

"The land is the nourishment that keeps me doing my work and also the images I draw from and what I want to pay homage to," she reflects. "I hope that looking at my work is like taking a deep breath and being there for a moment. I believe in the old ways of art, the art that paid homage to the world around and within us. Images of animals, the moon and trees. The earth is so reliable."

Halloween is a time when people recall the dead and feel the tug of the secret world around them. Liljeblad Davis says that late October — the Celtic period of Samhain — is a time to prepare for the world going dormant. Her sculptures embrace the mists and darkness and pay tribute to the unseen world.

"We tend to trivialize Halloween, but it is a very powerful time in the cycle of the earth," she says. "It is the darkest time of the year, a time when the walls between the seen world and the unseen world are permeable. When I walk in the woods this time of year with silence and attention, I can feel the invisible beyond the visible."

Liljeblad Davis is of Swedish ancestry, and that ancient, northern culture has shaped her art. She said her Swedish grandmother made no distinction between the worlds surrounding her. She saw angels

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Sculpture

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and was aware of and attuned to the spirits in the world. She knew the meaning of Sowen and passed it on to her granddaughter.

"We are a culture that is sort of trapped in place where we are unable to see and hear what's around us. We kind of miss the opportunity to talk about what this time of year is trying to teach," she observes. "Fall is especially teaching us about grief, about letting go and dying. If you don't stop and learn that lesson, I don't think we can grow up. We distrust ourselves to feel."

For Liljeblad Davis, the individual seasons direct her art and inspiration. The darkness of fall can be found in her sleek, hovering angels. They are sculptures that give form to the formless, that glisten and arch in a commanding manner.

"The angels that I make are rigorous, unflinching angels. They ask something of you, they are not fluffy," she explains. "Lots of people have stories of angels. There are lots of real relationships people have with that mystery. You can't control it, it's an invisible thing and it's so subtle. Sometimes people want an angel to watch over them and watch over land."

The Clark House Gallery in Bangor has a number of Liljeblad Davis' angels, and owner Susan Maasch said the response to the pieces has been overwhelming. She described the work as beguiling and remarkable.

"People love it. People recognize her work and respect it. They love the angels. I think they respond to the fact that they are not typical angels. They just sort of take your breath away," said Maasch. "Her work is very in tune to nature."

Liljeblad Davis works in paper and clay. Her sculptures are Raku-fired, a Japanese glazing method that requires temperature of 2,000 degrees F. When the pieces are hot and glowing red, they are pulled from the fire and placed on sawdust to harden, giving the finish a mottled appearance.

"It's very much the element of fire," she said.

While Liljeblad Davis has drawn her greatest inspiration and nourishment from her own land, she said her art also has been illuminated by visits to both wild and sacred places throughout this country and the world. Findhorn, a community in northern Scotland famous for its extraordinary gardens grown in the sand, Stonehenge, Avebury, Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and Peru's Machu Picchu have all influenced her and helped express the rhythm between the wild and the human desire to honor it.

As did the ancients, Liljeblad Davis has created Temples of the Senses across the spreading landscape of her farm. The Temple of Sound is a circular grove of Scotch pines she planted decades ago. People step inside and listen to the wind through trees. The Temple of Sight is a ridge with a sweeping view of the farm. The Temple of Taste is a vegetable garden planted in spirals. The Temple of Touch is a winding path through trees planted a few feet apart. The trees brush against people as they walk along the path.

BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY KEVIN BENNETT

Squidge Liljeblad Davis's sculptures "An Angel" and "Coyote" are featured at the Eastland Gallery in Portland.

There are barriers that humans try to set up to make us separate from nature. If you walk in the woods you can feel the potency of the land that is so around us in Maine. We have to respect the ancient sense of the sacredness of the land," she says. "When you are available to make images, the images keep coming up to you. Sometimes it's a deer, sometimes it's a bear, sometimes it's an angel and sometimes it is the angel of the moon."

Besides serving as inspiration, Liljeblad Davis's 110-acre Starflower Farm and Studios also provides visitors with an ideal setting for a time of relaxation and focus. Liljeblad Davis holds private retreats and workshops at her farm from June through October. Those attending are urged to walk the land and meld with its wild grasses, trees and creatures.

"The board of directors that sort of runs it is the land, the animals and the trees. I get my instructions from the land," she says. "I use the land but do not use it up. The elements of the earth stabilize people and makes things not so chaotic."

The Clark House Gallery is open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday. The gallery is located at 128 Hammond St. in Bangor. For private appointments call 942-9162. Another show of Liljeblad Davis's work, "Creatures, Devas, Angels and Elementals, a Walk in the Woods," is on view through Nov. 24 at the Eastland Gallery, 157 High St., Portland. Hours are 12-5 p.m. daily.

and Meghan Frederick (Maggie) for an affecting rendition of "At the Ballet." Ashley Emerson, as the surgically improved Val, is sassy and pert. And Annie Hewlett, as the off-key Kristine, is one of the delights of the evening.

While there are no outstanding voices and, except for Holyoke, no blazing dancers in this show, it achieves the heart of what creator Michael Bennett had hoped for when he opened "A Chorus Line" on Broadway in 1975 (and went on to win nine Tony Awards and the Pulitzer Prize, and accrued more than 6,000 performances on Broadway). This is an ensemble work, and this cast accomplishes that goal evenly. Music director Robert Bahr leads a hotshot band of fine musicians in an often underrated score by Marvin Hamlisch with lyrics by Edward Kleban. But the volume all too often overpowers the soloists. That may well be the acoustic reality of the cavernous Grand, but it's a frustrating experience for the audience.

"A Chorus Line" will be presented, without intermission, 7 p.m. Nov. 2 and 3, and 2 p.m. Nov. 4 at The Grand Auditorium in Ellsworth. For information, call 667-9500.