

Artist's cyanotypes are blueprints of the natural world

By Kathaleen Roberts / Journal Staff Writer
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"Angel Fish" by Marietta Patricia Leis.

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Mysterious images, some the sculpted outlines of bones or the frilled fan of a coral, float eerily in an azure sea.

These mysterious shapes originate from the most basic form of photography: cyanotypes. Marietta Patricia Leis' "Feather 1" is in her show at the Museum of Natural Science and History.

Marietta Patricia Leis' "Feather 1" is in her show at the Museum of Natural Science and History. A derivation of childhood "sun prints," they're created by placing objects on photosensitive paper and exposing them to light.

Albuquerque's Marietta Patricia Leis has adopted that process to depict specimens from the collection of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science. "Nature's Blueprints" runs from through Aug. 31.

The exhibition encompasses between 50-75 prints. Contributing artist and photographer (and Leis' husband) David Vogel will show videos of the process, along with still images.

The winner of numerous artist residencies around the world, Leis first discovered the shadowy technique through a University of New Mexico photography class. Four years ago, she spent time on a Portuguese island in the Azores called Flores (flowers). "I had read about Anna Atkins, who in the 1800s published the first illustrated book on botany," Leis said. "She did it with cyanotypes."

Inspired, the artist decided to follow Atkins' tradition and record her own impressions of the local flora.

A renovated stone barn was her studio, its large windows facing the Atlantic. The blue sea and sky saturated the time she spent on the island.

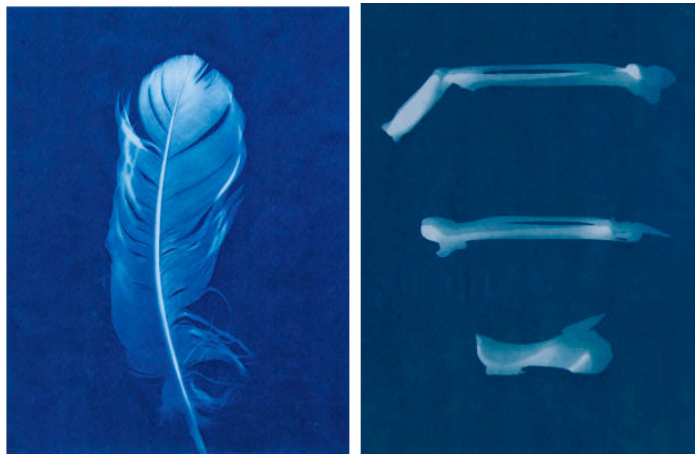
She created photographs on both fabric and paper, loving the spontaneity. A flower may flutter with the wind as it lies exposed to the sun, creating a "ghost" image.

The blue may intensify or fade, depending on the temperature of the rinse water setting the image. Texture surfaces if the paper wrinkles. Leis exhibited the results in a Houston gallery. During a Greek residency last summer, she turned to the sea for inspiration, using octopi, squid and shrimp as her models. The octopus tentacles became sun ray markings.

About a year ago, Leis approached the Albuquerque museum about a similar show using their stored specimens of bones, feathers, plants and flowers.

"It encompasses the sun, it has a chemical process and you use specimens of nature," she said. Originally, "I just wanted to show my objects from Portugal. But when I went in (the specimen) room, I was on fire."

She worked on the prints in December, January and February. The cloudy, cold days made each a hit-or-miss event. She could have turned to artificial light but wanted to stay true to the museum's mission. A fan of coral, a bald eagle skeleton and a whooping crane plume all turned into ghostly specters in a pool of blue.



Marietta Patricia Leis' "Feather 1" is in her show at the Museum of Natural Science and History. "Bones" by Marietta Patricia Leis.

"It's magical," Leis said. "It's like a printing press. You never know exactly what you're going to get. Sometimes, it transfers itself into something else. You don't have total control."

In Portugal, the Flores series reflected a spiritual connection to her Italian grandmother. "I grew up in Newark and East Orange, New Jersey," Leis said. "When I think of my grandmother, I think of color because her garden was so beautiful. I would go out in the garden with her as she was snipping flowers. "Sometimes when I'm in the studio working away with my hands, I think of her."

Leis is already investigating her next project – an exploration of Antarctica and its ice.