

Symbolizing a growing crisis in Africa

Arts – Exhibit

By Jessica Adams

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For many people, their awareness of the millions of orphaned children in sub-Saharan Africa is limited to photographs in National Geographic or charity commercials. According to UNICEF, the number of children orphaned by HIV and AIDS alone is a staggering 12 million and the numbers are expected to keep rising. Disease, famine and poverty have plagued Africa for decades, but unfortunately these children are largely forgotten. However, one Albuquerque artist is working to boost awareness and raise money to help shelter, feed and educate the children of sub-Saharan Africa.

Deeply affected by what she witnessed photographing children in the slums of Kenya four years ago, Naomi Natale decided to put art into action. For the past two years Natale and about 10 to 12 other volunteers have been organizing The Cradle Project, an art installation consisting of over 500 representations of cradles in all shapes and sizes. Each cradle is sponsored by a donation of \$100 and many will be sold in an online auction from June 7-17.

“The cradle represents the loss of potential and talents never nurtured,” Natale said in a recent interview. “The cradle was the only symbol that would do (the plight of these children) justice. I just really believe in the beauty and sacredness of childhood and it’s really sad that these children can’t enjoy it.”

Artists from all over the world, including school children from right here in New Mexico, donated their creations to the cause. The only stipulation for the project was that the cradles had to be constructed from found objects or scrap material. Many artists used items found in nature such as twigs and leaves to create nest-like structures; others used discarded parts of common household objects such as chairs, stuffed animals and mirrors. Barbara Grothus, a project coordinator and artist created “Cradle of Civilization/The Fertile Crescent,” an old fashioned lawn fertilizer filled with shredded Persian poetry that serves as a symbol of hope and fertility.

Some of the cradles are conceptual, such as Natale’s own entry, which is essentially an escape ladder hung from the ceiling and curved into the shape of a cradle near the bottom. Another striking piece is “Womb Illusion” by PD Rearick, made from a mirror, a clothes rack and a reflection globe. The sculpture creates the illusion of a whole cradle, symbolic of the possibilities

of these children's future, which is so dependent on increasing awareness around the world of the situation in Africa.

Other cradles are more literal, using antique doll cradles filled with twigs or fabric. The exhibit's juxtaposition of cradles that represent the more morbid and disturbing aspects against cradles that exude feelings of comfort, is an emotional experience. The artists were all clearly inspired to try and make a difference in the lives of these children.

"The artists were moved just in participating," Grothus said. "It meant a lot to (the artists) to be a part of it."

The 7th and 8th floors of 219 Central NW, now on loan for the exhibition, will soon become loft apartments. But for 11 days in June, art lovers and champions of social justice alike will be able to experience an inspired exhibition with a message that will hopefully enlighten and motivate steps toward change.

The Cradle Project book will be available for sale at the June 7 opening reception. All proceeds will be donated to The Cradle Project's partner organization, The Firelight Foundation, which works directly with orphans throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

The Cradle Project
Jun. 7 through 28
Opening reception:
Noon-5p, Sat., Jun. 7
1-5p, Thu.-Sat. and Sun., Jun. 8
219 Central NW (8th floor), 554.2086
cradleproject.org