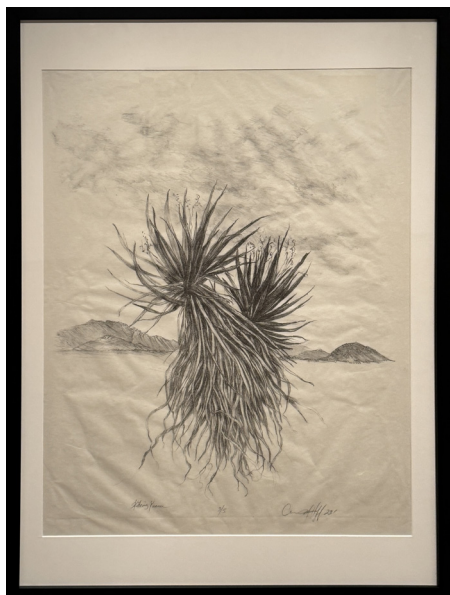


The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, *Desert Whispers*, an exhibition by Anne Hoff. The show is at Western Nevada College's Bristlecone Gallery from December 18, 2024 – April 9, 2025. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artist, Western Nevada College, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Josie Glassberg, who provided the following essay.

Anne Hoff Prints the Desert



Skittering Yucca, stone lithograph, 2023

Anne Hoff's 18-piece retrospective at the Bristlecone Gallery at Western Nevada College includes a lithographic stone with an image of two yucca plants suspended in a desert landscape. The plants are placed squarely in the foreground, their roots and leaves equally sharp and tufting in opposite directions – leaves growing towards the softly clouded sky and roots leaning into the sand. Dark mountains bisect the horizon, appearing either small or distant, giving hints – but not good ones – about the scale we are dealing with.

What can you say that hasn't already been said about the desert? Its warped distance, its stretched sense of time, its aggressive-looking life. Austere beauty. Endurance. Endlessness.

As an image, *Skittering Yucca* is a double – displayed once horizontally on the stone and then again, on paper, hanging vertically in the gallery. Both are beautiful, but only one is confounding. They are the *what* and the *how* of the desert. We know *what*. We can still get lost in it, though. The vastness of the void. The illusion that the yuccas are floating in mid-air as if pressed like flowers in the pages of a book. Maybe our thoughts skitter on the surface of the print, following the repeating lines of roots and leaves. Maybe our eyes rest in the gray of the clouds...but nothing we encounter makes us think twice about the origin of the desert.

The stone, though, is a mysterious object that introduces a dimension of higher order to the piece – both in its method and meaning. As an engraving method, lithography involves drawing on a porous stone, etching the markings into the stone with acid, then inking and printing the image on a press. For the artist, the process is physically rigorous and heady and, according to Hoff, almost spiritual.

For the gallery viewer, seeing a large, flat stone with an image etched into its surface can also feel a bit monumental. Like you've stumbled across an ancient blueprint, or you're at the end of a quest and, here is the rock that holds the key to the question, "*How did this yucca come to be?*"



Skittering Yucca, stone lithograph, 2023



Passages, stone lithograph, 2015

One answer is that Anne Hoff has been capturing the imagery of Nevada and Arizona deserts for three decades and is in love with the process of printmaking.

This is true. Since the early 90s, Hoff has been hiking the wilderness and drawing what she finds in her path. Over the years, the College of Southern Nevada professor has been inspired by everything from Joshua trees and deep canyons to scrubby plants, individual rocks, and the occasional human subject.

In a lithograph titled *Passages*, Hoff captures a canyon from a high point. Below, layers of rock curve around a narrow passage, shaped by long-gone water and eroded to reveal striations of sediment.

In *Variable Vistas*, the muscular lines of dead and dying trees obscure a rock formation in the background. With their similar contrast, the clusters of both tree and rock are equally

weighted in their linework, flattening the vista and casting doubt onto our perception of distance once again.

Another answer to the question of *how* is that we can't understand the desert without understanding that it comes from something else. In a physical sense, we might think of the stones as blueprints for creation or unearthed pieces of the fossil record. If you want to get philosophical, then the prints are the shadows in Plato's cave and the litho stones are the forms themselves, continually imprinting what is real onto something we can see, giving us a chance to approach the idea of *desert*, or *tree*, or *rock*.

When Hoff is less straightforward with her imagery, we approach other ideas, too, like *love* and *loss* – supernatural archetypes instead of ordinary natural objects.

One piece that hits particularly hard is *Slipping*, a large lithograph depicting a dead-but-standing tree that is printed on thin plastic and overlaid onto three ivory rounds of paper that form a trinity shape. Entwined in the roots and floating among the debris that surrounds the tree are carefully cut-out and handwritten words – the beginnings, middles, and ends of larger sentences taken from Hoff's mother's diary at the moment in time when she was slipping further into dementia and closer to the end of her life.

Looking at the jumble of tree roots tangled with the names of people we don't know and words with no isolated meaning – "Don," "Mary," "Tracy" "I'm" "to" "bad night" – we become sensitive to the fact that the lithographic tree



Slipping, stone lithograph, plastic, paper, 2016-2024



Circuitous Cycles, stone & polymer lithograph, 2017

image only contains part of the DNA for this piece. The rest comes from Hoff and her mother, taking what was set in stone and splicing it with the emergent properties of relationships, the entropy of the human mind, and any free will that is still possible in the space between the etched lines.

The paper trinity appears a second time with *Circuitous Cycles*. In this piece, the ivory rounds are printed with three identical images of twisting trees that are also hands, each positioned to reach towards the outer edges of the circles, frozen in mid-gesture.

Here, if we pretend that the triplet trees are the inevitable forms, then it is the positioning of images that offer meaning. Incarnation, branching realities, the consciousness of body parts fading into the oblivion of plants, or vice versa.

A piece titled *Descent* also uses the arrangement of two different lithographs – two different realities – to illustrate a third truth that feels like a bit like a prophecy. Set in a desert overlooking a string of buttes, a second image of three inverted, dead, and twisted trees descends on the first lithograph like three bolts of lightning. Contained in a cloud of gray wash, the trees hang like daggers, ready to strike the plateau with either total destruction or the inspiration of original fire.

A few of the stones do not have print counterparts in the exhibition. One stone, slightly smaller than the blueprint for *Skittering Yuccas* – is, at first glance, very similar to the first image. It, too, has twin yucca plants, bisecting mountains, and clouds. On second glance, the image has a slightly bigger sky with slightly more menacing clouds. Of course, we know that it has been printed somewhere, but without immediate evidence in the gallery, we can wonder if perhaps this scene hasn't yet happened.

A third stone has an image of a rock with a more questionable scale – it is either a large canyon or a close-up of a sedimentary cross-section. What is clear is that traveling down the middle of the image is a vein of wood, a tree root or branch, growing in the interstices of rock. Something living inside of something non-living, a message about resilience, a picture that could certainly come into being the moment Hoff runs it through the printing press.

Magical thinking aside, the stones' ability to show us the desert better than the real thing comes down in part to the futility of the medium. If the broad appeal of printmaking



Descent, stone & polymer lithograph, 2020

was once its mass production and reach, then the current appeal of lithography in the digital age is the knowledge that it's no longer the best tool for the job. Out of its element and between purposes, the stones – and their prints – offer text without context, meaning without use, pointing us towards details we would never otherwise notice.

Once the lithograph is printed, the artist grinds the image off the stone with sand, returning the rock to a blank slate – a geologic process in its own right and one that eventually comes to an end for each artist who works with the stones. For Hoff, that time came recently due to a spinal fusion injury resulting from the physical exertion of lithography. Now that the artist has passed the stones onto Western Nevada College (and picked up her drawing and intaglio work again), her relationship with the stones can be quantified in any number of ways – millimeters of surface, number of print editions, eyeball impressions.

Nothing that makes as much sense as the idea that Hoff was a desert prophet and we are still here, watching to see what she will make next.

Josie Glassberg
Reno, Nevada
January, 2025



Artist's Self-portrait
Anne Hoff



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