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The art of light and darkness: Rubin Center exhibits look at border in very different ways

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You could say that Jay Atherton and Cy Keener are reflective guys. They've been running around the University of Texas at El Paso campus setting up mirrors.

It's not some college prank.

It's for "Light Lines: Jay Atherton and Cy Keener," one of three exhibits that will be up Thursday through Sept. 21 at UTEP's Rubin Center for the Visual Arts.

Architects Atherton and Keener are creating a different kind of art exhibit, one that will "transform the Rubin Gallery from an art exhibition space to a vessel of light," according to Rubin Center Director Kate Bonansinga.

They've set up nine small, triangular mirrors that reflect sunlight onto the gallery, located near the south end of the Sun Bowl, from distances ranging from 25 to 400 feet.

The light will shine through windows - which had been covered when the 1920s building reopened as the gallery in 2004 - on the north, east and west sides of the building. It will create a natural light show that changes as the sun's refracted rays move from surface to surface.

"In some ways," Keener said, "the gallery and the mirrors become like tuned instruments that allow you to observe kind of ephemeral or intermittent events."

The quality of the light will vary depending on the sun's position and various atmospheric conditions, Atherton said.

"Even though there can be presumptions about reflective light being

the same quality, it's actually quite diverse, and what is reflected depends on wind, how much sunlight there is, if the mirror is hot," he said. "You actually get these heat-wave patterns on the edge of the glass. It's not a static light; it actually feels like it's moving."

The sunlight will splash the walls, the floor and what Bonansinga called "sculpted walkways," made of what Keener described as "layers of a porous fabric impregnated with plaster, which captures and transmits the light."

Atherton and Keener have been on campus since last weekend and were there even earlier to survey the gallery and surrounding area, which is framed by buildings and hills.

Atherton said the exhibit ties in with the Rubin Center's mission of using art to reflect life on this part of the border.

They focused on what he called the "fenceless atmosphere," including the light and the air. "The thing that was important to us was trying to capture the quality of light that results from the atmosphere from the two cities," Atherton said.

They own Atherton Keener, an architectural firm in Phoenix. Both have master's degrees in architecture from the University of California, Berkeley.

They'll shed some light on the exhibit with a free lecture, "Light Lines: Conception and Process" at 4 p.m. Thursday at the Rubin Center, and will present "Atherton Keener: Findings" at 11:45 a.m. Sept. 21.

Border baroque

Another exhibit opening at the Rubin on Thursday shines a different kind of light on a very difficult subject - drug war violence in Juarez and Mexico.

Titled "Rigoberto A. Gonzalez: Baroque on the Border/ Barroco en la Frontera," it features a dozen mostly largescale oil-on-linen paintings and several working drawings - all done in the powerful, mannered style of Italian Baroque paintings of the 16th through 18th centuries.

The biggest among them is "Balacera en Cd. Juarez. Federales, Sicarios de La Linea y Sicarios del Chapo" ("Shootout in Cd. Juarez. Federales, Hitmen for La Linea and Hitmen for El Chapo.") It's a street scene populated with bodies, grieving women and blackclothed soldiers. It measures 9 feet tall and 20 feet wide.

Others are more graphic. "Se Los Cargo La Chingada" ("Beheading") depicts a shirtless man on his knees, his head bowed as an executioner's knife is about to plunge into the back of his head. The body of a headless man lies nearby.

In "Para Que Aprendan A Respetar 5" ("So They Learn to Be Respectful 5"), a man's severed head lies facedown, his mouth wrapped with tape.

Gonzalez is a Tamaulipas native who lives in San Jose, Texas, and has a master's degree in fine arts, cum laude, from the New York Academy of Art. He was an artist-in-residence in Roswell from 2008 to 2010.

"In all of the works, dramatically lit groups convey the anxiety and distress of recent violence in northern Mexico," Bonsansinga said in her exhibit announcements. "As drug-cartel violence continues to intensify in Ciudad Ju?rez, exhibitions such as (this) that critically raise awareness about the deadly outcome of the lust to control the illegal drug empire are more necessary than ever."

Gonzalez will talk about his work in a free lecture, "Shadows Across the Border," at 11:45 a.m. Sept. 14 at the gallery.

Pop art space

A third show, "Spatial Constructs: The Gift of Amy and David Niles in Context," features nine works by two 1960s pop artists, New York sculptor Leo Rabkin and printmaker Allan D'Arcangelo.

The works were owned by Gerald T. Niles, a psychiatrist, whose son, David Niles, and daughter, Amy Niles Gladstein, donated them to UTEP in 2004.

Bonansinga said the works, which will be exhibited here for the first time, provide "significant links to the evolution of contemporary art in the United States."

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