

## Creative arts in a college town

FREEDOM OF **expression**

**D**eanna Wood began dreaming about tornadoes as a child. Growing up in Kansas, she remembers hearing sirens wail in the middle of the night and rushing to the basement to wait out the storm with her parents. She never saw a tornado, but at age 5, she did see “The Wizard of Oz” and soon after had the first of her recurring dreams about a tornado outside her window. All these years later, tornadoes are still her obsession. She watches “Storm Chasers” and “Storm Stories” on TV. She even took storm spotter training from the National Weather Service. And now as an artist in Denton, she shares her visions vividly in painted collages.

Her traveling show “Seeking Shelter” is a collection of these vibrant collages depicting tornadoes and their aftermath — wrecked homes and snapped telephone poles. The work, she says, illustrates the fragility of life. It is done in encaustic, an ancient Greek technique that involves melting beeswax and resin. To give it color, it is often mixed with oil-based paint. The result adds texture to the canvas as well as varying degrees of transparency and opacity. “There’s stuff under the wax, in the wax, and on top of the wax,” says Deanna. “I like being able *not* to tell where things are.”

Denton may be better known for its music scene, but art exhibits like Deanna’s, which encourage the experimental, are stirring up new interest in the city as a creative oasis in Texas. “I don’t think we have the recognition that we deserve yet statewide,” says Jo Williams, executive director of the Visual Arts Society of Texas.

Her group and the Greater Denton Arts Council (GDAC) supplement already-thriving art programs at the University of North Texas and Texas Woman’s University. But newer events like the Ultra Extra Arts Mix and the TWU ArtsWalk are pulling in the 20- and 30-something crowds by breaking away from traditional ways of creating and experiencing art. At the same time, the city of Denton is

commissioning a growing collection of public art, not just the usual bronze sculptures (there are two new ones by local artists at City Hall East and the Downtown Square), but also a brick mural commemorating the historic African American community of Quakertown in the lobby of the Civic Center.

The granddaddy of arts events in Denton, however, remains the Materials: Hard & Soft

Exhibition, now in its 22nd year. The show’s contemporary craftsmanship includes works done in clay, fiber, glass, metal, paper and wood. Past winners include a vase resembling frozen waves of water, handcrafted jewelry and a carved chess set.

The Ultra Extra Arts Mix, meanwhile, is its edgy cousin, offering a one-night buffet of music, dance, poetry readings, film screenings, and art made on the spot.

Food is also available, if not in its usual form: portraits in chocolate candy, cookies baked with Braille words.

The local arts scene, as a result, is evolving beyond its contingent of amateurs and dabblers (“watercolor ladies painting bluebonnets,” as one artist put it) to include more contemporary-minded professionals and faculty at UNT and TWU. The new TWU ArtsWalk, for instance, offers a combo of drama, dance and music by students and faculty presenting traditional media in an untraditional way.

Thanks to new events like that — and new blood — GDAC executive director Margaret Chalfant expects the art scene to flourish in Denton. “Creativity breeds creativity,” she says. “We welcome different art forms and encourage people to excel in what they’re doing.”

Some still see the arts in Denton as a work in progress. But that has its own kind of appeal, says TWU ceramics professor Colby Parsons. (His own work often incorporates industrial and domestic elements, such as garden hoses spouting in tangles from a clay vase.) “There’s something fun about the intimacy of being involved in something when it’s small and then when it’s starting off into something larger,” he says.

The Denton scene is wildly diverse, for sure. The GDAC is made up of more than three dozen groups, ranging from Celtic dancers to the Bach Society to the Handweavers Guild. Chalfant, however, resists comparisons to another city along the I-35 corridor known worldwide for its music and arts scene.

“We’re different than Austin,” she insists. “A little more cutting edge.” ■



## [ just the facts ]

**What: Materials: Hard & Soft**

**Where:** Meadows Gallery, Center for the Visual Arts, 400 E. Hickory St.

**When:** Jan. 31 - March 29

**Hours:** Tuesdays - Sundays 1 - 5 p.m.

**What: Ultra Extra Arts Mix**

**Where:** Center for the Visual Arts

**When:** Friday, March 27, 7 - 11 p.m.

**What: TWU ArtsWalk**

**Where:** TWU Dance Building, Bell Ave. & Administration Dr.

**When:** Thursday, April 9, 5 - 7 p.m.