

SOUTHWEST

# The Southwest Invitational returns after a more than 20-year-hiatus

DIANDRA MARKGRAF Arts and Culture Reporter Jan 3, 2016



Detail of Phoenix-based mixed-media artist Christine Cassano's piece *Aerial Circuitry* and the intricate copper circuit boards. Photo courtesy of the artist.

After 100 artists from around Arizona were selected to be a part of “Southwestern Invitational,” 50 were chosen to move from the flash point in Yuma in April to Prescott, Tubac and finally to the Coconino Center for the Arts. After this stop, the show will move once more to Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix.

“Southwestern Invitational” opens at CCA, 2300 N. Fort Valley Road, with a free reception Saturday, Jan. 9 from 6-8 p.m, and runs through February 13. To learn more, call 779-2300 or visit [www.flagartscouncil.org](http://www.flagartscouncil.org).

At the intersection: Along with seven Flagstaff-based interdisciplinary artists, more creative types from around the state entered to exhibit their chosen media ranging from ceramics to massive rusty sculptures. One artist in the exhibition, and one at the vanguard of mixed media, is Phoenician Christine Cassano.

The Virginia native has spent a lifetime studying art, earning her Bachelor of Fine Arts at Old Dominion University in her home state. Cassano's singular piece included in the exhibition, "Aerial Circuitry," demonstrates her work's continued evolution. The large rectangular image transfer on wood panel with circular copper circuit boards protruding from metal stems pepper the refined visual landscape.

Cassano's stunning array of material and intrigue lend a view into the artist's interpretation of the delicate balance between science and art. The resulting dialogue, she said, stems from her need to explore contrasting work physically, mentally, environmentally and within herself to connect opposites.

In recent years, Cassano explains her artistic forays have landed at the intersection of biology and technology. This intrigue, she said, catalyzed with her own life-changing experience when she dislocated her hip. A joint replacement and hard work restored her body.

"A blend and exploration of biology and technology enabled me to heal," she explained in a recent e-mail. "So the fascination within the biology and sciences is auto-biographical in that way, but I position the work in a larger context—a more universal approach."

Like water in the desert

As spectators dive into her visual representation of complex networks that is the external natural environment and internal systems. From her studio in the warehouse sector in Phoenix's downtown metropolis, Cassano is able to stretch her proverbial legs as she amasses giant sculptures using found objects gathered from scrap piles and desert sands alike.

"At the heart of the work is a need to harmonize the biological and the industrial, the self and civilization, the intuitive and the determined," she said. With clay, wood, concrete, found plastics and even horse and javelina bones, Cassano arranges larger-than-life assemblages that attempt to interpret life and death in the desert.

"Biology is life and it is death, but I am also interested in the human, emotional connections to these forces," she said, noting her compulsion to scavenge leads to an item's new life. "While out hiking, I found the horse's jaw, and then doubled its identity by casting it in aluminum at a friend's foundry. This led to creating the piece titled 'Jawbreaker' by embedding these two pieces into concrete to create a free standing sculpture. Both jawbones are immobilized within tight layers of concrete which could suggest that beneath the apparent is an invisible world — entombed yet visible — sharing the secret of death. On the top of the concrete, I created a shallow trough where a small garden of moss grows -- and even the buried past supports new growth."

These are just a small sampling of what contemporary Southwestern artists intend to explore in their chosen fields. "Southwestern Invitational" was recognized as the linchpin in Arizona arts, and its absence did not slip by unnoticed all this years. And as Cassano noted, the Yuma Fine Arts Center's invitational exhibition is a step forward in actualizing a community of artists, with the added benefit of establishing connections between creatives and viewers alike.

Learn more about Cassano's mixed-media artwork at [www.christinecassano.com](http://www.christinecassano.com), and keep up to date with the "Southwestern Invitational" at [www.yumafinearts.org](http://www.yumafinearts.org).

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