

PRESS RELEASE Central Gallery

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Hours: Mon - Thurs 3 - 6 pm and Sun 2 - 5 p.m.

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GRETCHEN BECK

Torridity

An Exhibition of Drawings

Based on the Degradation of **The Nigerien Landscape.**

September 22 - November 3, 2005

Gallery Talk: Monday, October 3 at 4 pm. A reception will follow the talk.

All events are free and all are welcome.

Gretchen Beck, served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Niger, West Africa for seven years. Today, she continues to conduct research in Niger that involves the study of different aspects of the Nigerien landscape, the Djarma and Fulani cultures and the art forms made by the Nigerien people. Beck's work takes place in what the Djarma people call *saaji fimbi* or severe desert. In her artist statement, Beck writes of Niger being a predominately Muslim country where rituals such as alms giving, washing before prayer and facing to the east five times a day brings a sense of order to an uncertain existence. In her drawings on exhibit in Central Gallery Beck chooses to emphasize geometric structure to highlight the importance of regiment in Nigerien culture.

With a population that continues to increase, Niger continues to lose its natural resources and suffers from desertification. Desertification occurs when arid lands become 'desert-like' due to a lack of rainfall, loss of topsoil and timber. Thus the barren landscape challenges the Nigerien people to meet their basic survival needs. In the language of Djarma, a *yaasay* or a proverb helps the Nigerien people understand the complexities of life. Proverbs often compare individuals to different natural resources such as Niger's indigenous trees. Creative ways of looking at life and finding cures for a variety of maladies fill these phrases and short stories. For example, the *Kobay* tree often has four to eight trunks. The trunks form from the highest branches and shoot down as roots that Nigeriens believe resemble a woman's braided hair. A mother of a bald child will make a paste from the roots and cover her child's head with the substance. After two weeks of this repeated activity, the child will grow hair. Often aging and infested with illnesses, the *Kobay* tree offers people other important remedies. An aging tree such as this can be compared to a Nigerien who suffers from sickness, lack of food and rain and the destruction of land. However, despite these ailments, the individual survives, just as the tireless tree endures.

Beck's drawings reference Niger's indigenous trees. The medium of drawing serves as an effective tool to express Beck's experience living and working in Niger. Beck believes that drawing's slow and patient nature invites onlookers into the artistic process.

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