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New artists expand Thousand Springs festival

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If you haven't been to Ritter Island, the Thousand Springs Festival of the Arts is as good an excuse as any to visit.

The island, surrounded by towering basalt canyon rims, naturally flowing springs and the winding Snake River, will host more than 55 accomplished artisans, a beer and wine garden, local foods vendors and crafters' demonstrations.

Boise artist Cindy Smith, who calls herself "The Pencil Pusher," is one of many new artists added to this year's lineup of painters, glass artisans, woodworkers, photographers, sculptors and more.

Smith, 51, is a real-estate appraiser, but her passion is creating realistic graphite art. Utilizing seven grades (the hardness or softness) of graphite pencils, the mostly self-taught, award-winning artist loves to spend hours at the drawing board creating realistic pictures of nature and wildlife.

"It's a hobby, but it's a serious hobby," Smith said. "My goal is to achieve the most realistic renderings I can. ... My work is often mistaken for a photograph and that's a pretty nice compliment."

With a natural ability to "see" what she is drawing, Smith thrills in observing the values and tones in nature, fur, metal, glass, skin or trees.

"My biggest inspiration is nature, wildlife, the outdoors," Smith said. "But I also draw domestic pets and portraits."

Another new artist is feather painter Joe Watkins of Utah.

Watkins who uses wildlife and American Indian imagery in his works. They start out with a pencil sketch and are finished in a multilayered process that includes feathers strategically glued in place and then painted over with acrylics, creating a shadowbox effect when matting the paintings.

Artisan coordinator Betsy Morishita said all the artists are juried prior to acceptance into the festival and guests will find many mediums to connect with.

"We look for creativity, that the art is different and original. We make sure the craftsmanship is done well," Morishita said. "Salability is also important; we want to make sure that people will be drawn to and are interested in their art."

From willow furniture to decorative gourds, and oil paintings to jewelry, festival goers will find pieces to fit any budget or personal style, Morishita said.

Craft and wildlife demos have always been a part of the Thousand Springs Festival, but this year there will be more than ever, including blacksmithing, wool spinning, gourd decorating, soap making and fly tying by the Magic Valley Fly Fishers. Demonstrations will also be put on by plein air artists, who will paint both days on site to capture Ritter Island's spectacular scenery.

Julie Pence, prior executive director with the Southern Idaho Land Trust, said the festival is the group's main fundraiser. The trust is a local conservation group that promotes and oversees conservation easements. Its mission is to preserve open spaces throughout Magic Valley for future generations.

"We consider this to be the Magic Valley's premier arts and crafts festival," Pence said.

Weather permitting, the festival can draw about 4,000 guests and raise more than \$20,000 for the trust. Because the festival is set on Ritter Island, people see firsthand the kind of land the trust wants to preserve.

"The setting is really the best thing about the festival. You couldn't ask for a more beautiful place," Pence said.

Local entertainer and funny-man Danny Marona is set to emcee the event, and music headliners include the Idaho Old Time Fiddlers and acoustic jazz musician Jamie Findlay of Los Angeles.

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An island of art

The 16th Annual Thousand Springs Festival of the Arts will be held from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sept. 27 and from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sept. 28 at Ritter Island in Hagerman. Admission is \$6 for adults, \$5 for seniors and \$3 for children ages 3-12.