

A FIELD GUIDE TO FLORIDA
TROPICALIA

7 days of play » 18-19

INTO THE WOODS

Bonita Springs artist employs photography technique from 1850s » Page 3

On tour

AUTHOR SWINGS BY OLD STOMPING GROUNDS » 2

Simply golden

FORMER CHILD ACTOR LIVES QUIET LIFE IN NORTH NAPLES » 6

Cover story

London Amara sees what others don't

Bonita Springs artist uses collodion photography — an intensive, but spontaneous technique that emerges on the spot

CATHY CHESTNUT
SPECIAL TO FORT MYERS NEWS-PRESS
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Explorers of Southwest Florida's primitive landscapes have ever been drawn to record them, in rubbings, wood carvings, sketches, paintings, lithography and photography.

Perhaps, during a daytime foray, you have come across a group of plein-air painters, their palettes and brushes documenting their minds' eyes.

What of an ice-fishing tent? The chances of coming across an artist at work in our subtropical 85-degree heat and 95-percent humidity would, on its face, seem implausible — unless you're tagging along with Bonita Springs artist London Amara.

The ice-fishing tent serves as a light-tight field darkroom when Amara is in the Big Cypress region or a parcel of land not yet razed yet hemmed in by civilization.

Her chosen form of documenting — collodion photography — is an

See Amara, Page 16E



London Amara's chosen form of documenting — collodion photography — uses 75 to 80 percent ultraviolet light to record an image which is more than humans, so the technique "sees" things we don't. SUBMITTED

Amara

Continued from Page 3E

intensive, but spontaneous technique that emerges on the spot, birthed in the makeshift darkroom. This process was reportedly invented in 1851, and replaced the original daguerreotype.

Like photographers since the technology's invention, Amara also carries a large-format camera and its tripod, and the essential black cloth that allows the photographer to get a keen look into the viewfinder while protecting the image plate from sunlight.

She prepares her glass, or metal plate, with a collodion mixture, followed by a bath in a silver nitrate solution — both of them hand-mixed the night before or in the field.

After exposing the light-sensitive plate to her prechosen landscape, she returns to the darkroom, where, like an alchemist, she watches a high-definition image transpire as it evolves through developer, then fix and three rinses, in what feels like a “whole new meditative process. I am looking at it as it emerges,” she said. “By the time you're done, everything is done. It has to be done successively.”

When finished, the image holds more information than the eye can record. Collodion technology uses 75 to 80 percent ultraviolet light to record an image — more than humans, so the technique “sees” things we don't, she said.

She also uses lenses that are 150 years old. “You can't buy this type of glass anymore. It's not profitable to manufacture, and the quality is exquisite. The images are recorded with a far superior ‘vision’ than our sight,” Amara said. The result, “each image is a library of information.”

Thirty of her images are on display in the exhibition “ethos” at the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center in downtown Fort Myers through the closing reception on Tuesday, March 27 at 5 p.m.

Half are centered in Southwest Florida; the others take viewers to the Pacific Coast in California and British Columbia. The show includes plates, collodion images (negatives) and the third iteration, a crisp, black-and-white silver gelatin (positive) print.

She gleaned five of the show's images from what seems to be an abandoned patch of land at Inter-



Sophia at Sea by London Amara. SUBMITTED

If you go

What: “ethos” exhibit by Bonita Springs artist London Amara has both hand-made, silver gelatin prints created from film negatives and images created by the photographic process known as collodion photography

When: Now through the closing reception on Tuesday, March 27 at 5 p.m.

Where: Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center, 2301 First St., Fort Myers

Information: sbdac.com

state 75 and Bonita Beach Road. “There are so many gorgeous areas that we drive by and don't pay any attention to — and why would we? That particular property has had couches, junk and trash. I drove by this for years before it occurred to me to stop and look at what's there,” she said.

To get five approved images, Amara figures she took about 80. It takes at least 30 minutes to obtain



Pictured is Bonita Springs artist London Amara's whose chosen form of documenting is collodion photography — an intensive but spontaneous technique that emerges on the spot. SUBMITTED

through this process a good image. “That's a huge percentage,” she said, “meaning it was a gold mine.”

Early years

Amara, 40, was raised “in a fairly

remote forest in Ohio,” where her father was a builder and her mother an art educator. She says in her artist's statement that from the wilderness derived what she calls “a language that undercuts and surpasses words, teaches fluency in extrasensory perception, and requires a feeling, sensing and intuitive state for communion.”

She found her way to Fort Myers Beach, then Bonita Springs, in 1999 after graduating as a classically trained fine artist from Columbus College of Art and Design in Columbus, Ohio. She had a focus on sculpting, including fabricating through welding, and painting—while working as an esthetician at the beachside Ritz Carlton spa in Naples then later in real estate.

This is the second official exhibit Amara's had at the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center. The first was in 2013. The unofficial first was when the art center wasn't fully up and

See Amara, Page 17E



London Amara carries a large-format camera and its tripod, and the essential black cloth that allows the photographer to get a keen look into the viewfinder while protecting the image plate from sunlight. SUBMITTED

Amara

Continued from Page 16E

running — “the main atrium was still in disrepair,” she recalled — and Amara installed shredded tires and 25-inch-by-12-inch, black-and-white prints of tire tread burn-outs in the side wings.

Amara agreed to this month’s show three years ago, but at the time, she had no idea what three years would bring. Though she had studied the fundamentals of photography in college, she steered clear of it. The technical aspects — f-stops, exposures, lenses, darkroom development and equipment — “were way too complex. It slowed down the meditative thought,” Amara said. “I hadn’t picked up the camera. I knew nothing about it.”

She reconnected with it in October, during a reflective visit her family’s Ohio property to finish welding commissions. While camping along a creek for two weeks, keeping the campfire alive day and night, Amara had an epiphany. She recalled, as a small child, stand-



Lectio Divinia by London Amara. Shot at I-75 and Bonita Beach Road. SUBMITTED

ing in the family’s makeshift basement darkroom with her mom, who had gone to school to become an art teacher. The nonstop campfire, immersion in nature and arriving memories “were a spiritual experience” that led her to her current attraction with collodion photography.

Which makes sense because, she said, through Photoshop,

through selfies and social media posts, through all of the past two decades’ advances, “we’ve all worked really hard to remove anything that we consider imperfect.”

With this form of photography, Amara has learned to let go of control. She can’t make eight of the same images; none will be identical. “Each one has a human touch to it,” she said.