Hours of Operation:
Hours listed below.
Visit our website for more information.

• Centennial Museum
  Wednesday through Friday
  10:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M.

• Chihuahuan Desert Gardens
  Open every day
  Dawn to Dusk

• Lhakhang
  Open 1st Saturday of every month
Welcome
Daniel Carey-Whalen, Director

Welcome back! As vaccination numbers increase and case numbers continue to remain low, the Centennial Museum is once again open to the public. As of press time, the Museum is open from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Wednesday thru Friday and the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens continue to be open from dawn until dusk every day. And starting Saturday, June 5, the Lhakhang will be open at the regular times of the first Saturday of the month and every Wednesday from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. We hope to see you soon.

When you do come back, there is a lot happening at the Museum. From our collaborative exhibit, Tiny Tunnels, Big Connections with UTEP’s Biodiversity Collection to the Museum Studies student exhibition, Beyond the Borderlands, there are plenty of cool things to see. However, this newsletter focuses on our most breathtaking exhibit at the moment, Into the Great White Sands. Sam Winer’s interview with photographer Craig Varjabedian gives us both an insight into the artist’s thoughts and a window into this majestic landscape. Kevin Floyd provides us with a deeper dive into the adaptive strategies of the native Chihuahuan Desert plants that not only survive, but thrive in this white, wind-blown world. Regardless, we hope that these articles encourage you to visit the Museum and in turn, to make the trip north to White Sands National Park to experience this unique environment again, or for the first time.

If you are excited to come to UTEP and visit us, however you are not sure when, we encourage you to join us for our First Saturdays event on June 5th. Claudia Ley writes about the continued collaboration between the Centennial Museum and the Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts, UTEP Arts Alive. Both museums will be open, as will the Lhakhang. There will be opportunities for cultural interaction and engagement with student artists and curators. Bring the whole family!

Daniel Carey-Whalen
**UTEPArts Alive Open House:**
**Celebrating the arts, natural history, and culture on campus**

Claudia Ley, Education Curator

In preparation for beginning to operate at medium-density, with some faculty, staff, and students gradually making their way back onto campus this summer, the **Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens** is preparing to welcome back visitors. After more than a long year of being away from the museum and not having any in-person meetings or programs, it has been nice to finally get back on campus, see familiar and different faces, and begin planning for the future.

As a post-pandemic welcome back, the Museum and Gardens is partnering with the **Rubin Center for the Visual Arts** for a full day of programming as part of the **Arts Alive** interdisciplinary collaboration project. This event will take place on Saturday, June 5th, from 10:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m., with site-specific programs, and self-guided and guided exhibition walk-throughs, which include the reopening of the Lhakhang. As part of this collaborative project, we are planning a series of First Saturdays on-campus this summer and fall where students, families, and other visitors can engage with the arts, natural history, and culture on campus.

Those visiting the Centennial can expect to see two new exhibitions, along with the permanent collection and gardens. **Into the Great White Sands**, photographs by Craig Varjabedian, looks at lively desert landscape of White Sands National Park. A curated student exhibition titled **Beyond the Borderlands: A look at Chinese and Japanese Objects in El Paso**, looks at objects donated to the museum and found in a downtown dig off San Jacinto Plaza. Some students from this spring semester’s museum studies class will be present to give tours and share their experience working in this unique exhibition. One student, Elisa Huizar, mentioned, “For me...
one of my favorite objects is the Chinese coat, the midnight blue one. It is my favorite because of the attention to detail the maker had. The coat has many hidden details... which is what makes it so interesting.” And since going into lockdown soon after the launch of Tiny Tunnels, Big Connections: Ant Relationships Shape the World, we have extended this exhibit until the end of July, so visitors can learn more about these insects that often get unnoticed but play a crucial role in our landscapes and ecosystems.

The Lhakhang will also be opening its doors to visitors between 11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m., with guided and self-guided tours with the use of the interactive guide. Visitors will also get to experience two newly augmented murals by Augment El Paso found inside, featuring the birth of Buddha and the Land of the Thunder Dragon. And to complement these wonderful exhibitions and spaces visitors will also get to enjoy a musical performance by UTEP Alumni, musician, and poet Nancy L. Green, who will be performing traditional flute music from the East, along with complimentary refreshments and treats. And those making their way to the Rubin Center can expect to be amazed by the contemporary artwork created by students as part of the 2021 Annual Juried Student Art Exhibition. This exhibition showcases works of art and design created by undergraduate students during the 2020-2021 academic year, which include metals, painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, and graphic design. Visitors can also take a complimentary “Artifacts of Isolation” catalog and kit, which features jewelry pieces and wearable art made by students in the Jewelry and Metals Department during the pandemic.

While we understand that many might still be hesitant about being out in public and
engaging in social settings, we hope to give visitors a safe and welcoming experience. Visitors can have some peace of mind knowing that all spaces will be closely monitored to operate at a reasonable capacity while still allowing a somewhat “normal” gallery experience. We will continue to follow the recommended health practices, which include recommending wearing masks on campus and maintaining proper social distance to help ensure the safety of all. For more information about this event, exhibitions, or other things happening at the CMCDG please visit our website or social media to stay up to date.
An Interview with Craig Varjabedian

Samantha Winer, Curator

Like many people, I often do not appreciate the “tourist” sites near where I live. They remain in the background of my mind, hazy memories from field trips or summer vacations from long ago. I am ashamed to say that White Sands National Park is one of those places for me. From my few visits to the site, I never had the inclination to look beyond “sand,” “white,” and “desert.” Yet, thanks to our new exhibit, Into the Great White Sands, with photographs by Craig Varjabedian, I am finally (and belatedly) able to appreciate our newest National Park.

The exhibit is from Varjabedian’s photo book “Into the Great White Sands,” published by New Mexico State Press, featuring pages of gorgeous photographs of the park. Yet, seeing these photos printed and enlarged makes me appreciate the beauty of the park even more. Much of the credit goes to photographer Craig Varjabedian, an award-winning photographer, author, and teacher.

I was fortunate enough to have a phone interview with Varjabedian, where we were able to discuss his experience with the project and even his scariest moment in the park. The following is an edited excerpt of our interview.
Why White Sands?

I sorta accidently found White Sands. I knew about it [from living] in New Mexico, and I was down in that part of the state. I had some time, I've seen other photographs of White Sands, [and] knew what to expect, drove in and went into the park and [I was] amazed and overwhelmed and all those really good things. I spent most of my day there. I remember, being overwhelmed and a sense of wonderment, and I put it on New Mexico Bucket List. About 6 months - 1 year later, and [I] went again, [and was] looking for a place to unwind and clear my mind and reset. I remember one of the days I was down there and walking among the dunes and can hear my heart beating. The sound of my heart was being picked up by the dunes and echoed back. Realizing there was something here for me, [it] started off as a personal thing. Looking for a place to rest and clear my mind, get back to normalcy. I took photos and when I got back to my studio [and looked at them] I went oh my god.

NMSU (New Mexico State University) reached out about a new book, and I suggested White Sands. Took about five years. I would spend a week, and come back to my studio, on and off for several years.
What was it like being out there at night? Miraculous, although there is light pollution. I had to make special arrangements with the park to do that. You don’t have a sense of the dunes; it can be precious to hike the dunes. Really hard to hike the dunes where you have no shadows, no incline or decline.

[At White Sands] there is an amazing confluence between the earth and the sky. The most dramatic thing that goes on there is the thing between the sky and the land. In White Sands [one] see forever. You got this incredible neutral ground, the sand, [and] depending how much light is reflecting off, it allows colors to play off the sand. Colors seem a little bit brighter. One day I was out there photographing, and about to go back home and walking to my truck, [then I] turn around and see the most glorious sunset. My advice is to [stay there] as long as you can.

One of the first trips to White Sands, [I was] photographing, late in the afternoon, taking pictures, following the light, the shapes, and lost light, [and then I] realized I was lost. I couldn’t find the car. I had to climb a dune to figure out where I was. Since then, I have always gone out into the dunes with a GPS.

“Similarly, you have amazing sunset shots, what was getting those like?”
The place taught me how incredibly beautiful it is, unlike other places I've visited. White Sands can be almost anything the visitor wants it to be. A place for a family reunion, you can get married there or [have] high school pictures taken there, slide down the dunes. Or a place where one could go and find quiet, where literally the only thing you are hearing is your heartbeat. I can't think of any other place where I've been that I can hear my heart. When there weren't any more portraits to make, [I knew] I was done with the project.

Multiple times during our interview, Varjabedian praised the National Park Service (NPS).

This project really would not have been possible if hadn't been for the support of the NPS. NPS was able to take me to places the average visitor could not get to. NPS is the unsung heroes.

I want to thank Mr. Varjabedian for his thoughtful responses and taking such amazing photographs. “Into the Great White Sands“ will be on view at the Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Garden until July 3rd, 2021.
**Living in the White Sands**
Kevin Floyd, Botanical Curator

White Sands is a beautiful and otherworldly environment. It is easy to understand why so many photographers spend time there, capturing memories and sometimes developing museum exhibitions like *Into the Great White Sands*, the current exhibit in the Tom Lea Gallery. The conditions in the National Park present several challenges to the plants that live there. The Park Service has lots of excellent information on their website, which provided much of the content for this article. On the edges of the gypsum dunes is scrub habitat typical of the Chihuahuan Desert. This is where cacti and other desert succulents like agave grow. These plants tend to be slow-growing and are not able to grow fast enough to keep up with the shifting dunes. In the dunes is where the most severe growing conditions exist. The sandy gypsum soil does not retain water or nutrients and is constantly shifting with the winds. Several plant species have adapted to these difficult conditions by using a few different strategies.

Two shrubs, Hoary Rosemary-mint (*Poliomintha incana*) and Skunkbush Sumac (*Rhus trilobata*), are examples of the “Hold on” strategy. They have tap roots that reach into the water table and transport that water to the rest of the plant. Some of the water leaks into the surrounding sand, forming a hard mound called a pedestal. The pedestal is stable enough that when the loose sand dune is blown away, it remains with the plant at the top, its roots holding on to the column of sand. Several of the grasses and wildflowers grow fast and produce lots of seeds. This often occurs in the low areas between the dunes, where there are more nutrients, and the roots are...
closer to the water. These plants, like Alkali Sacaton (*Sporobolus airoides*), Indian Ricegrass (*Achnatherum hymenoides*), and Gypsum Centaury (*Centaurium calycosum*), have their seeds blown into new habitat. The new individuals continue to grow as the old plants become covered in the advancing dune.

Including plants that are adapted to such unique environmental conditions is a challenge for the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens. We try to mimic the environmental conditions to some degree, such as growing Indian Ricegrass in a bed that has a large percentage of sand. Some plants are more forgiving in their growing conditions, such as the Hoary Rosemary-mint doing well in a variety of soil types, although all tend to the sandier side. Other plants are so well-adapted to the gypsum soils that we are not able to have them in the gardens. This is also a good reminder to all of us that one of the best mottos for successful gardening is “Right plant, right place.” Even if you are not trying to grow plants from the gypsum dunes of White Sands, it is still important to research the requirements and full size of any species that you are considering for your own yard.
OPEN HOUSE:
CELEBRATING THE ARTS, NATURAL HISTORY, AND CULTURE ON CAMPUS
SATURDAY, JUNE 5TH

RUBIN CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS
10AM-2PM
See works in all media in the 2021 Annual Juried UTEP Student Art Exhibition. Families are invited to participate in the Head in the Clouds self-guided family tour of Donald Lipinsky’s Cloud sculpture with free take-home activity kit. Live DJ and light refreshments.

LHAKHANG ON CENTENNIAL PLAZA
11AM-1PM
Join us for the re-opening of UTEP’s Lhakhang, with self-guided tours using our new interactive interpretive guide. Experience two newly augmented murals by Augment El Paso featuring the birth of Buddha and the Land of the Thunder Dragon.

CENTENNIAL MUSEUM AND CHIHUAHUAN DESERT GARDENS
10AM-4PM
Visit three exhibitions that explore nature and culture in the Chihuahuan Desert - Beyond the Borderlands: A look at Chinese and Japanese Objects in El Paso, Into the Great White Sands and Tiny Tunnels, Big Connections: Ant Relationships Shape the World. Enjoy a musical performance by UTEP Alumni, musician, and poet Nancy L. Green, who will be performing traditional flute music from the East, along with complimentary refreshments and treats.

ALL ACTIVITIES ARE FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC
PARKING AVAILABLE SEE MAP BELOW

For more information please contact Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens by phone 915-747-5565 or email centennalmuseum@utep.edu