

## Outside inside



### Posthumous exhibit reveals the artist's life of connecting with nature

**W**hen she was a girl growing up in Berkeley, Ann Leon sometimes accompanied her father, Dennis Leon, on hikes into the nearby Coast Ranges foothills. It was her job, she says, to carry drinking water in a backpack he'd fashioned for that purpose.

by  
**Robert Speer**  
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**Review:**  
*Dennis Leon: I Am Here* shows through  
March 24.  
Panel discussion:  
March 10, 3-5 p.m.,  
with Ann Leon, Joan  
Leon, Steve Oliver and  
Robert Herhusky.

**MONCA**  
900 Esplanade  
487-7272  
monca.org

Leon had a thing for stones, as the current exhibition of his work, *Dennis Leon: I Am Here*, at the Museum of Northern California Art (MONCA), in Chico, powerfully demonstrates. And not just stones: Lakes figure prominently in several large wall pieces, including the dramatic "Memory Lake" series of almost monumental collages in the museum's Headley Gallery. And trees are an important element in the five pastels that comprise the similarly named "Lake" series in the Phillips Gallery.

The collages are especially interesting for the way they seem to change, depending on whether the viewer is close by or standing back. Up close, they show the rough edges of the torn paper, which are almost sculptural in their tactile roughness. From farther back, however, that roughness is no longer visible, and the pieces seem more painterly—without losing their raw, monumental energy.

They are complemented by a number of sculp-

tures in bronze or wood that are similarly suggestive of nature's ineluctable presence through time. Leon has written: "Nature is made up of lots and lots of little pieces and things—yet its unity is implicit. ... Nature doesn't notice my dilemma of being simultaneously in it and an observer of it."

**Ann Leon is a well-known local chef and cooking instructor who owns Leon Bistro in downtown Chico. Her sister, Susan Leon Peterson, is a partner in the enterprise. Their mother, Joan Leon, lives in Berkeley. Together they are managing Dennis Leon's artwork, which they keep in a Chico storage unit.**

Leon died in 1998, a victim, his family believes, of medical error. He was 65 years old and vigorous but had back problems from all the lifting he had done. He died just moments after surgery to fuse some vertebrae.

By the time of his death, Leon had had more than 80 exhibitions at such institutions as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Oakland Museum, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the legendary Oliver Ranch sculpture garden in Sonoma.

Leon came to this country in 1951 and earned a master of fine arts at Temple University in Philadelphia before moving to Oakland in 1972. There he taught at the California College of Arts and Crafts (now California College of the Arts) for 20 years and chaired the Sculpture Department from 1972 to 1988.

During this time he was also a prolific maker of art who worked out of a large studio adjoining his house. Winches and pulleys used to move the huge sculptures dominated the space.

The MONCA exhibit showcases mostly large pieces, but it also contains a number of small (4 or 5 inches square) watercolors with titles such as "Rain and Shine" and "Delta Storm." They are like exquisite windows into the weather conditions their titles suggest. □

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