Artists find inspiration in conflicts

By Melissa Hillebrand
Entertainment Editor

Two Creighton faculty members exhibit personal dilemmas through art, from issues with the Catholic Church to a massacre at Wounded Knee that killed over 300 Sioux.

Joel Davies, assistant professor of journalism and mass communication, and John Howard Thein, associate professor of fine arts, bring their artwork to the Lied Center Art Gallery tonight. The opening reception is from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., and the show will run for three weeks.

Davies' artwork is digital compositions on his personal issues with the Catholic Church. The paintings are based upon the massacre at Wounded Knee.

“Schism” is the title of Davies' show. The word schism means a separation of division into factions, or a formal break of union within a Christian church.

A schism for Davies is his struggle to combine his Catholic faith and upbringing with his strong science and technology-oriented background. He left the church a few years ago, and is encountering obstacles in his quest to rejoin it.

“This is my therapy,” Davies said of his artwork.

Davies' other schism is within art.

“Half of me is a graphic designer, concerned with communication. The other half of me is an artist, where I am concerned with metaphor, symbolism and making things rather than communicating,” he said.

Twelve of Davies’ 13 digital compositions focus on his issues with the church.

The paintings about belief echo my opinion that belief is dangerous. Belief is simply taking what you are told at face value while faith is constantly challenging and testing ideas and world views. People with faith tend to view decisions with a greater ethical and moral scope. People with belief hold inquisitions and crash planes into buildings,” Davies said.

These issues are exploration and comparison of science and religion as two means to discover truth and his conflicting feelings for the Catholic Church and its leadership. The other composition is a self-portrait.

“I'm hoping that at a liberal arts Jesuit school, people will want to have a dialogue about it,” Davies said. “Clear communication is the highest measure of successful design.”

Davies’ designs are 11 x 17-inch spreads. They are illuminated manuscripts, similar to an old hand-rendered Bible that has geometric designs and colored patterns interlaced in words. He said that he thought of the Book of Kells, an illuminated manuscript of the four Gospels from the late eighth century, as he made his compositions.

He designed his digital compositions using Photoshop, Illustrator, Painter and Poser software. In these programs he painted, used 3-D models and used original and stock photography. Davies cut himself on an envelope while working on the “Crusader” piece, and even scanned in his blood and used it as a paintbrush.

After Davies finished his digital compositions, they were printed as photographs on archival media using light jet technology. He then put the photographs in “beat-up” frames. These frames remind him of church pews, he said.

Thein was Davies’ mentor when he was an undergraduate at Creighton from 1991 to 93. They have collaborated on art shows before.

“I'm thrilled to be showing with him, I think it's cool,” Davies said.

Thein was equally excited to be presenting his group of paintings, entitled “Wounded Knee, The Painted Spirit,” with Davies. His paintings use watercolor or oil paints, very different than Davies’ digital compositions.

Thein's paintings are based on the massacre at Wounded Knee, an area in South Dakota. In 1890, over 300 Sioux were killed at the hands of the military. The Sioux were buried in a six-foot grave a few days later, but not until after a blizzard froze their bodies in grotesque positions, Thein said.

Thein became interested in Wounded Knee after researching the visions of Black Elk, a Sioux medicine man. Black Elk was a part of a group of Native Americans that went to Wounded Knee to help the Sioux. After looking at photographs taken of the destruction at Wounded Knee, Thein saw that he would be able to do a group of paintings based on the massacre.

At the Lied Center, Thein is showing eight paintings made up of 37 panels. His paintings are large enough to take up an entire wall.

His compositions are his meditations on the events at Wounded Knee. The paintings are based on events recorded through photographs, such as the throwing of Sioux Chief Big Foot in the mass grave, and on events not captured on camera. One such painting is of a sacred hunter. Hunter collected clothes off of the dead Sioux before they were buried.

Thein hopes that people will take the time to see his images, and said he will deem his exhibit successful if a person takes the time to see his paintings and reflect on them.

Many of his paintings use the color red. Red is a sacred color to the Sioux Indians, he said. It is a sense of spirit and that an idea is still alive.

“Paintings are like poetry,” he said. “You need to read between the lines to get a greater sense of what is going on,” he said.