

La Esquina's Happy Tree Friends is smarter and subtler than its title

By Dana Self

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Sometimes, the simpler an exhibit's theme, the more diverse and meaningful the art turns out to be. That's the case at La Esquina, where right now it's all about the tree. The tree as subject may sound so unfussy that dullness is guaranteed, but the work here emerges organically from the broad, straightforward theme. Too bad it's called Happy Tree Friends. The awkward, arch title belies an engaging authenticity.



Kristina Estell's *Reconstruction*

the fabric and the subject. And yet, like many of the exhibit's works, hers is lighthearted and humorous, refusing to take itself too seriously.

The exhibition — the full title is Happy Tree Friends or Standing: Tree As Agent, Index, Object of Desire (Part 1) — includes more than 25 artists and is part of a larger project started at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas in collaboration with the school's Natural History Museum and Biodiversity Research Center. (The second of its two parts runs from late April through early June at the Paragraph Gallery.)

Duluth, Minnesota, artist Kristina Estell's "Reconstruction" borrows from pop culture, quilting bees, crafters and children's illustrations. She fashions her distorted domesticity from fabric commercially preprinted with animals, forests ladybugs, butterflies, and other flora and fauna. Pinned to the wall, the pieces curl, flop over and seem to behave naturally, in opposition to their , artificiality. Estell creates a perhaps unintended yet dynamic tension between

Local artist Johnny Naughahyde turns to autobiography in his diminutive and funny pieces. Painted on first-day covers (the commemorative envelopes canceled by the U.S. Postal Service on a stamp's issue date), each tiny image tells a story. Many of the envelopes commemorate Abraham Lincoln's sesquicentennial, and all are from Naughahyde's massive collection, dating to 1959 and the early 1960s. He has painted a log on each envelope or postcard, suggesting his own tree-climbing childhood in woody Wisconsin. Taken together, the ten covers offer a witty collision of non sequiturs — for

instance, a smart little rendering of a tree piece captioned with a plinky typewritten "Lincoln's log."

Video artists Barry Anderson, from Kansas City, and Cari Freno, of Richmond, Virginia, both exercise a pastoral, even tender posture toward nature. Anderson's "Epic Escapism (2)" narrates the quiet story of a small limb dangling on a power line. Oddly mesmerizing, the limb — juxtaposed against a blue sky with no other distractions — actually drives a narrative of loneliness and suspense. Will it fall as it twists in the wind? As ridiculous as it sounds, the imagery is convincing, if not gripping.

Cari Freno is no less dramatic and filmic with her Thoreau-like fidelity to nature. Her four-part video follows a young woman, presumably the artist, essentially hugging trees. Except for the ambient noise of the woods and the sound of the woman moving, the footage is very quiet as the camera tracks the artist embracing trees that are too big to hang on to and trees that are too slender to wrap her legs around comfortably. In one of the videos, she lies atop a log. Freno's images are compelling, affectionate and even comforting because they evince human sensitivity and connection to the natural world. Watching the woman gamely trying to hold on to a large tree, her arms and legs barely wrapped around the trunk, is pitiful and yet endearing.

Despite their low energy — or even because of it — both of these videos exert a strange fascination as we wait for something to happen. What might spark tedium in a less skillful artist's imagery instead draws us into these intimate, earnest narratives.

Kansas Citian Diane Henk's "Be Still" and "Massive Pine" are text-based works that gracefully evoke her impressions and are based on her own poetry. The language that Henk has penciled on layers of translucent drafting film evokes the elemental fragrance and vertical stolidity of trees. Like many of the works in this wide-ranging exhibition, Henk's pieces are lively and engaging observations of the unpretentious thing called tree.

Details:

Happy Tree Friends

Through April 18 at La Esquina,
1000 West 25th Street, 816-221-5115.