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## VISUAL ART REVIEW

# Artist Judith Levy's 'documentaries' climb a fictional family tree

**Artist Judith Levy's 'documentaries' delve into the genealogies of some well-known names.**

By DANA SELF

Special to The Star



This silver bullet is among the exhibit's artifacts relating to the Lone Ranger, for whom Judith Levy created a fictional historical narrative.

on display

“Judith G. Levy: The Last Descendants” continues at Paragraph Gallery, 23 E.12th St., through Nov. 5. Hours are noon-5 p.m. Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Thursday. For more information, call 816-221-5115 or visit [www.charlottestreet.org](http://www.charlottestreet.org).

The personal is always political, and history is not a series of fixed moments in time, but rather perspectives and truths that shift depending on who tells the story.

Lawrence-based artist Judith Levy excavates the past and reconstructs it through her fictional historical documentaries. She stitches together social, political and economic realities of the times in which fictional characters lived and how those histories shape us.

In her faux documentary film series “The Last Descendants,” Levy interviews the imaginary last relatives of the Lone Ranger, Huckleberry Finn, and Hansel and Gretel.

Levy constructs elaborate family trees, which map immigration patterns, slavery, and American social, cultural and racial developments. These family trees, which are central to the exhibition, help establish her characters’ invented lives.

Huck Finn’s ersatz familial history reveals that his mother was black, his traveling companion Jim was his half brother, and Huck himself was the product of rape. This family tree cleaves wide open the painful realities of American slavery and its potent aftermath.

Levy interviews Faye Finn-Cohen and her two sons in “Huckleberry Finn.” Among issues of paternity and racism, they discuss not getting invited to the “white” side of the Finn family reunions. They ruefully ponder how the “black side of the Finn family really wanted to do it,” but the white side did not. “I really want that Finn Family Fun T-shirt,” quips one of the sons, ironically.

The interview telegraphs an uncomfortable reality about a fictional family that mirrors concrete issues.

In “Hansel & Gretel,” the last descendants are siblings portrayed by sculptor John Hachmeister and his wife, Diane. As if they were siblings, they fractiously interrupt each other and quibble throughout the interview about whether Hansel or Gretel saved the pair from their forest misadventure, who in the family tree might have been a Nazi collaborator, and other familial secrets.

Toward the end Levy raises a question about jewels the Grimm brothers were said to have paid Hansel and Gretel’s father for “exclusive rights” to their story. Levy cleverly folds contemporary journalistic sensationalism into the story.

In “The Lone Ranger,” Levy speculates about the Lone Ranger’s sexuality and his relationship with Tonto. That she makes the Lone Ranger a descendant of Turkish Sephardic Jews allows Levy to “challenge conventional notions of heroes,” according to her email exchange.

An assortment of bogus Lone Ranger family heirlooms rounds out the exhibition. Displayed in a glass case, period pocket watches, spectacles, a ring that was a “gift from Tonto” and other mementos make up the collection.

Viewing these carefully labeled items, it’s easy to forget that it’s all an elaborate and skillfully deployed invention.

By paradoxically fictionalizing characters to unpack and examine history, Levy expands a dialogue about how we understand history’s various truths and how they all may be interpreted differently and discontinuously over time.

“The Last Descendants” is a complex, multilayered, narrative exhibition exquisitely crafted and acted by Levy.

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