



The Oregonian

Ted Vogel's bark has some bite

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Artists who take up environmental themes usually are stuck with the most straightforward of symbols: tree stumps and wildlife and birds. After a while of looking at the flora and fauna of environmental art, it's difficult to find anything in it besides the obvious: Humans are ruining the Earth, nature is disappearing, etc.

While clay, glass and metal artist Ted Vogel's work sometimes falls into the enough-already trap of big-stick environmentalism -- in one piece, a tree stump drips blood-red droplets -- most of the work shown in the Contemporary Crafts Museum and Gallery displays a remarkable amount of restraint. In them, Vogel has honed and developed the environmental theme into pieces that are, indeed, remarkable.

Two pieces deserve particular mention for their scope, grace and visual wow. The first, "Campfire Tales," a set of four chair-sized tree stumps arranged in a circle on the gallery floor, combines grandma kitsch with well-observed naturalism. Vogel, ceramics program head at Lewis & Clark College, cast the stumps from iron and etched the metal to look like bark, but the corners and ends are too rounded and the black of the metal is too pure for the stumps to be mistaken for actual wood. On the top surface of each stump, where the chain saw would have cut, Vogel etched the swirling pattern of an enlarged fingerprint. The point is big-stick -- humans are destroying the forest -- but the look is ironic pop. In bending the symbols of environmental art to his own artistic ends, Vogel makes something new, a vision combined with a warning, a punch line with a punch.

The second piece adds a delicate super-coda to the stumps. Called "Passage," the piece consists of two moss-covered branches and a series of black and white clay birds perching on them. Real wood branches hang from the high gallery ceiling, directly above the stumps, and the piece is light, airy and slightly sinister, a work that creates mood rather than thought. In it, the part stands in for the whole, implying a complete tree and an entire forest, as well as a nest of ink-black crows and pure white doves. But it also suggests that such a fantastic thing could never exist outside the creative mind of the artist, and there is sentiment in that, without sentimentality.

In Vogel's pieces, the hand of the maker is everywhere apparent in them. He uses his materials masterfully to create pieces that have a graceful, controlled presence, the mark of a mature artist exploring a thought rather than stumbling toward a conclusion. Known around town as the bird-and-bark man, in this show Vogel has boiled away the superfluous and merely pleasing to arrive at the essence of his idea. Like his silly and sublime stumps, the birds perched on the branches of "Passage" are the admirable result of Vogel's heavy artistic lifting. Pinched, molded and obviously man-made, the birds remain recognizable, an ideal of bird-ness formed out of clay.

An interesting but undeveloped installation at Nine Gallery by Trude Parkinson and Elizabeth Stanek purports to replicate the experience of the hearing loss of both artists. The installation only scratches the surface of this rich subject, however, and the artists pull back from the idea instead of immersing themselves in it, which is odd, considering that immersion is what the installation is about.

Separated into two parts, a three-dimensional felt spiral and a phone booth with no phone, the work invites the viewer to both wander to the middle of the spiral and to stand at the center of the booth. The felt of the spiral mutes the creaking sounds of the gallery, and an audio track in the phone booth plays a laundry list of words in varying degrees of muffle. The point of both parts is to reproduce the effects of hearing loss in a metaphorical setting, the spiral standing in for the channels of the ear, and the booth for the futility of verbal communication sans sound. But after noticing and marveling at the change of audio quality, the viewer is left underwhelmed by the single-headed thrust of the work.

At Nine Gallery, 1231 N.W. Hoyt St.; through June 30.

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