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'Unpack and reheat' may not be enough insight

But this installation rewards patience and curiosity in those who enjoy high-concept art

by Deena Kinarthy

At first glance, Unpacked and Reheated, a new installation art exhibit at Open Space Gallery on Fort Street, looks like a mistake.

Dozens of ordinary cardboard boxes are stacked in the middle of the gallery room upstairs. The space surrounding it seems somewhat empty. Upon closer inspection, however, I realize the boxes are exactly what I am supposed to be looking at. And as I enter the labyrinth of interactive art, more vivid images appear in unassuming places.

The next hour is a continual discovery. During the opening this past Friday night, the work of two very talented artists, Steven Rayner and Brendan Fernandes, inspired me to pay close attention to every detail, every nuance, and every deeper meaning hidden below the surface. My curiosity was sparked and perceptions were challenged.

Rayner's pieces are simultaneously lighthearted and startling. He mixes bionic animal shells with artificial objects and technology. With tongue-in-cheek humour and a sense of playfulness, a cougar rests high above people's heads on an iPod-shaped tree branch on an artificial tree.

A nearby coyote exhibit shows the animal peacefully resting on a white block. The artist here has a good sense for space and size; the coyote is positioned on an angle and diagonally balanced. The scrounging animal seems to be the piece that sparks the most conversation among curious patrons. One older gentleman turned to me and inquired how I pronounce the word "coyote."

And it is like this with all the works. Humans and animals, objects and people from mixed cultures and backgrounds co-exist in time and space.

Rayner makes insightful connections between our man-made, artificial world and the breathing natural world. From a chirping-bird wall painted in artificial neon-green leaf patterns, to a waterfall of radios, the art challenges the boundaries between human progress and nature.

Brendan Fernandes' work is like entering another world—a captive world that is made of uniform cardboard boxes and molded deer statues. The images here are a little more sad and disturbing. Deathly white, fragile deer statues hide in various spots amongst the cardboard boxes. On the ground, Fernandes creates a trashed, man-made look with shredded newspaper bits strewn about and bubble wrap with strips of masking tape lining the work. Dense, narrow walkways enclose viewers. We are uneasily caged in, wary of the precarious environment around us.

Fernandes rightfully chooses dimmer lighting here compared to Rayner's exhibits, adding to the uneasy mood, and creating contrasts in shadows and light, and corners for the statues to hide in. Such contrasts frame the entire gallery—dead and alive, caged and free, artificial and natural. The work is imaginative.

I had the privilege to meet and speak with the artists, to gain further insight into their work. Perhaps a written blurb about the work, in a pamphlet or program, would help other viewers to understand the artists' visions, and enrich the experience of the artworks.

All in all, Unpacked and Reheated is not for everyone. It may fall under the category of "high concept" and its appreciation takes patience and genuine curiosity, but if discovering new art is your cup of tea, it will prove to be a thought-provoking exhibit.

Unpacked and Reheated is a free exhibit, and runs until April 7.