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Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Gahan

Artist Elizabeth Gahan stands next to her installation, "Tree Pods," part of the Center of Contemporary Art's fifth annual exhibit at Carkeek Park, "Heaven & Earth."

Carkeek Park, where heaven meets earth for the fifth time

Art interacts with nature in annual exhibition

07/18/2013

By Elizabeth Wang

Whether it be the inspiration to paint the colors of the fauna and flora or admire the picturesque views of nature itself, nature and art have always gone hand in hand.

From July 13 to Oct. 20, Carkeek Park is acting as the four walls that house the installations of artists from across the Northwest and, occasionally, a few beyond our state. "Acclimatized: Heaven & Earth 5," presented by the Center of Contemporary Art, or CoCA, features 14 artists whose works are now on display throughout the park.

David Francis, artist-curator, worked with CoCA to create this exhibit, calling it a step away from downtown art galleries and a step toward unexpected art now found in our own backyard. Embracing this year's theme of acclimatization, he explains that the exhibit is always growing and changing to fit its modern-day setting.

"It's not just the climate, but it's also getting used to something," Francis said, defining the term. "Even though it's our fifth year, we're still working and getting it down."

Francis' piece, "A Square Meter of Glacial Clay," almost literally conceptualizes acclimatization. Using glacial clay smoothed out on a flat surface, the piece depends on any "user interaction" it encounters, cracking and reshaping the final, framed result.

"It'll crack and dry and make an abstract shape that's random," he said. "If it rains, it'll crack over again. People can go over and put their hand in there and it'll crack again. In the 21st century, it's hard sometimes to tell where nature stops and humanity begins. They're interconnected now, so my piece sort of shows that in that their participation in the piece is what really makes the piece."



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At Large in Ballard: Artistry

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David Francis' "A Square Meter of Glacial Clay" dries and cracks under the sun, changing as it interacts with nature. Photos by Elizabeth Wang

Unlike Francis' work, which stands slightly off the marked path, some installations are quite obvious. Suzanne Tidwell's "Half Court of Croquet ... Anyone?" is splayed out on an entire field. Tidwell's installation incorporates the tall light posts at the end of the trail with multicolored yarn sleeves knitted to fit around the poles. Lying next to them are three supersized mallets and hoops, also covered in yarn, welcoming visitors for a round of the sport.

While setting up her installation the previous year, Tidwell overheard two children complaining about having nothing to do in the field. So she took it upon herself to create a play space for her jaded visitors. And in a generation acclimatized to the impeding of technology, this was a way to get visitors out and about and familiar with another world through creativity.

"(I wanted to) create something that is sort of imaginative play," Tidwell said. "There are no limitations really how the game can be played. And it's a game played outside in the natural world."



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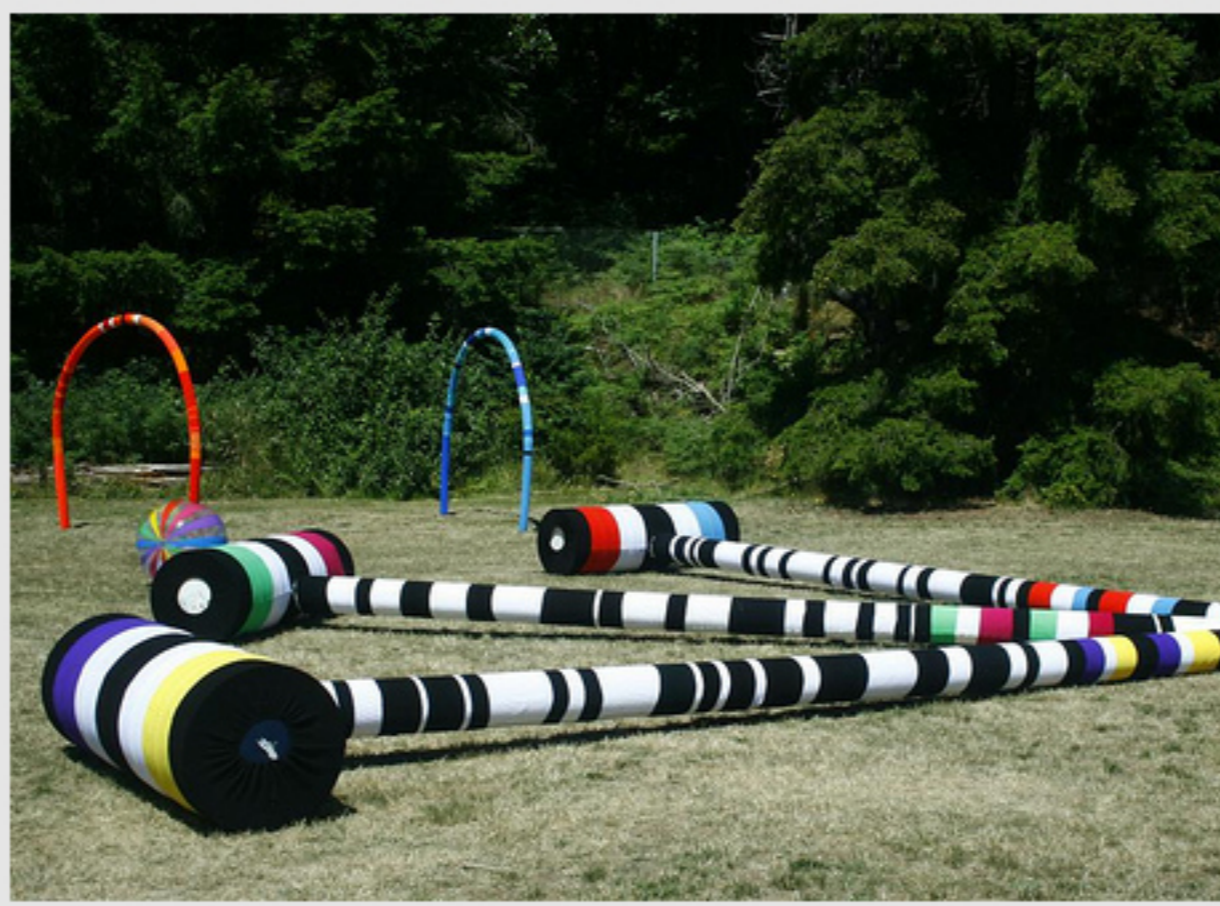
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Three large croquet mallets, covered in yarn, are ready to be played with as part of Suzanne Tidwell's installation "Half Court of Croquet...Anyone?" Photo by Elizabeth Wang



Suzanne Tidwell finishing up her project. Photo by Elizabeth Wang

Though Tidwell's homage to "Alice in Wonderland" is strange and bright and a little bit mad, Elizabeth Gahan's "Tree Pods" is the opposite in which it tries to mimic and blend in with nature.

Using corrugated plastics and political-advertising yard signage, Gahan combines shapes and colors one would see in a natural environment, but contrasts them with materials that are synthetic.

"How I think of my artwork is a hybrid between manmade materials and constructed spaces and natural spaces," she said. "That's the world we live in today – this hybrid. These materials and these ideas and these plastics that we make and the advertising we create, we create them for specific practical purposes, but then they have a life of their own in a way we didn't intend."



*Elizabeth Gahan's "Tree Pods" attaches itself to a tree branch at Carkeek Park.
Photo by Elizabeth Wang*

To Gahan, acclimatization means consciously developing and preserving our environments through the ever changing motions we go through as an urban space. The natural environment and the constructed environment are intertwined and creates conversation that influences our culture.

Wrapping around tree branches and layering over rocks, "Tree Pods" is a way to show forms that fit within the nature context, but still make reference to the city around it.

"At first blush, it's a really interesting use of materials, something that is beautiful so that you want to think about it," Gahan said. "And then the second layer, I hope they recognize the materials and where the materials come from and how we treat our urban natural spaces (with) a more conscious decision making about the material we choose to use and how we use them."

*For more information about the exhibit or any of the artists, visit
<http://www.heavenandearthexhibition.org/>*

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