

ARTS & CULTURE JANUARY 13, 2016 8:50 AM

New installation in Tacoma's Seymour Conservatory puts an art spin on science

HIGHLIGHTS

Local artists bring imagination into the science of evolution

Plants and art dialogue in the Seymour Conservatory

Opening reception Friday; guided tour Jan. 28





BY ROSEMARY PONNEKANTI

rponnekanti@thenewstribune.com

It's challenging to fit art into a conservatory. It's not just that humidity destroys paper and canvas: surfaces are uneven, lights and power are tricky, and of course there are plants hanging everywhere. The art has to adapt — and that's part of the point of "Evolution," which opens Friday (Jan. 15) in Tacoma's historic Seymour Conservatory in Wright Park. The other point, made in subtle and tangible ways, is that evolution in the 21st century is full of strange possibilities, in which art is just as valid as science.

"Evolution" has one of Tacoma's most imaginative curators in Lisa Kinoshita, who — as the owner of art-and-plant-boutique Moss+Mineral — has the perfect eye for juxtaposing plants and art. Working with artists and conservatory staff, Kinoshita has tucked the sculptures into the botanical displays as if they've always been there, commenting on their living surroundings.

Ironically, the first thing you see doesn't speak much to the subject. Claudia Riedener's bulbous, oversize ceramic heads are fun in a Roman party kind of way, but they've made an appearance in a few other shows before this (301 Puyallup Ave., for example) and they don't say anything original anymore, let alone about evolution.

Surrounding the heads, though, is a fascinating audio work by Susan Surface, who has sampled mockingbirds using natural calls and imitating everything from car alarms to grinding machinery. Synching the mimicry to sound even more like the man-made original, she's evolved the birds' own evolution into something out of "The Hunger Games," eerie and discomfoting.

Farther on, Yuki Nakamura explores the landscape of trees with tiny islands of colored vinyl stuck to the peeling bark of the allspice tree. This is the conservatory's biggest plant, scraping the dome's ceiling, and yet the bright patches of vinyl creeping their way up the trunk bring your eyes down, like a disease slowly being absorbed by the tree, changing its very essence. In fact, it's the tree that's evolving the art: by day three, Nakamura had already observed how fast the trunk peeled, and how the bark landscape was changing from what she had originally, painstakingly, copied onto transfer sheets.

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More Nakamura works dot the plantscape: lifelike ceramic light bulbs growing like green-spattered mushrooms from the dirt, and cactus-shaped protrusions emerging in smooth white clay from the koi pond.

Ed Kroupa makes visual evolutionary jokes: a Cactopi, sculpted in green foam, sprouting toothpick prickles and echoing the green tendrils of the succulents surrounding its bed of pebbles; and four “seadragonflies” floating in the canopy with iridescent plastic wings and glowing blue-green bodies. It’s funny, but Kroupa’s morphing of species has a scary undercurrent of reality, given genetic engineering and species’ reaction to chemicals in water bodies.

Other artists in “Evolution” imagine the future in different ways.

Don High explores the idea of plants consuming civilization, with mossy-tubed tentacles curling up from and eating down a stone cairn, lit from within for extra weirdness. Elizabeth Gahan, whose vinyl geometric flowers adorn the Woolworth Windows downtown, creates postmodern lanterns from the same billboard vinyl, their diamond striped graphics lending a Mondriaan touch. Draped in fishing nets, illuminated and hanging from the ceiling like designer crab pots, they create an ocean adapted to its plastic-waste intrusion. Jennifer Robbins gives her lichen and branches a radioactive hue and intelligence. Brent Watanabe’s video loop explores ideas of dog evolution, and Phil Roach builds a peephole diorama into a “biological nightmare.”

Right at the end of the tropical room, Sean Alexander and Paul Cavanaugh create their own artistic evolutionary experiment. In a window frame suspended from the boughs of a fiddle-leaf fig tree, an ant colony lives in a burnt-orange desert eating aqua gel (what ants actually live in on space expeditions, apparently). Compared to the real windowpanes just behind, mossy and fogged up, the ants’ environment is manufactured and pristine and — without a queen — doomed.

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“EVOLUTION” GETS YOU THINKING VISUALLY, AURALLY AND CONCEPTUALLY, A BIOLOGICAL CABINET OF CURIOSITIES.

“Evolution” gets you thinking visually, aurally and conceptually, a biological cabinet of curiosities that dialogues in form, color and intent with the botanical curiosities around them. It’s the perfect marriage of content with venue and the kind of show the Seymour should host far more often.

Rosemary Ponnekanti: 253-597-8568, @rose_ponnekanti

EVOLUTION: ART, SCIENCE AND ADAPTATION

Where: Seymour Conservatory, Wright Park, 316 S. G St., Tacoma.

When: Opening reception 6-8 p.m. Friday (Jan. 15), featuring Grammy-nominated musician Hunter Lea and Moon Age. Then open 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays through March 6. Guided tour Jan. 28. Open until 7 p.m. third Thursdays of the month.

Cost: Suggested donation \$3.