

The outside of
"Paper House"
is like a thick, '70s
shag rug.



Art City

Seeing ourselves
through the trees

The interior of "Paper House," by artist Joan Backes, is lined with delicate rice paper and vitrines displaying artifacts related to trees, including polished slices of petrified wood, giant pine cones and little models of trees fashioned from newspaper pulp and electrical wire.

Backes layers work with meaning



Mary Louise
Schumacher

*Who doesn't
have
associations
with the idea
of a house or
a memory of
a beloved
tree?*

When Joan Backes was a girl, she could duck through a neighbor's backyard and find herself lost in Grant Park, where wooden footbridges and stone stairways bisect the woods and steep ravines and lead to Lake Michigan.

Her dad took the Backes brood there to sled and toboggan in winter and to fly kites in spring, when they'd marvel at the trilliums, violets, columbine and jack-in-the-pulpits blanketing the hills.

"Trillions and trillions of trilliums," her dad would say. Near the park's entrance, carved into a Bavarian-style covered bridge, is this invitation: "Enter this wild wood and view the haunts of nature."

It's a beckoning that could just as easily serve as a welcome for Backes' exhibit at the Dean Jensen Gallery.

Backes is an internationally recognized artist who's had several notable shows in recent years in places such as Scotland, Germany, Sweden and New York. Her work is rooted in her experiences of the Wisconsin landscape, in places like Grant Park and the North Woods, where her family vacationed.

"All of my work comes from grow-

ing up in Wisconsin," she says. "It was at the riverbed near those bridges where I would gather clay to take home to make things as a kid."

But Backes' work is more than mere homage to childhood haunts. It is about origins and notions of home, literally and metaphorically. From the architecture we live in, to the planet we inhabit to the complex, psychological associations of "home," her work is layered with meaning.

It is about the cycle of things — how the stuff of Earth generates, grows, alters and decays, both at the hands of nature and the hands of humans. It is about the shifting appearance of matter in the immediate term and in the longer stretch of history.

Backes' icons of choice are universal and approachable — the house and tree. Who doesn't have associations with the idea of a house or a memory of a beloved tree?

Sitting in the center of the gallery is this show's centerpiece, "Paper House." The light emanating from this gabled, abode-like installation is unexpected.

It is a flood of glowing, hot white. It



SLAWONIR BALA PHOTOS

Backes' "Multi-Species" tree is made of reclaimed wood and leaves "cloned" in plastic.

Please see **ART CITY, 4E**

From page 1

ART CITY

Joan Backes' work layered with meaning

fills the doorway like a solid, bright white door. It sends our pupils squeezing inward.

It recalls fictional space stations, those in the movies, where everything is colorless, weightless and clinical, where moral questions are clarified apart from the earthiness of everyday existence.

And while the installation has that cool sense of unreality, it is eager to be

liked, too. Outside, the house is a shaggy poof. Like a thick pile, '70s shag rug or what local art historian Katherine Murrell, who wrote an essay for the exhibition's catalog, called the coat of a "gentle, domestic beast," it begs to be touched, petted even.

But this seemingly unkempt, downy pile is actually a covering of shredded computer paper, former trees used up for fleeting human purposes now subdued, sliced up and ready to leave little lacerations on our fingertips if we dare indulge. The thin shreds that shroud the little house evoke ideas of privacy and concealment, ideas we also associate with home, though in a different way.

Inside, the space is lined with delicate rice paper and vitrines displaying artifacts related to trees, polished slices of petrified wood, giant pine cones, X-rays of bark, dirt and

little models of trees fashioned from newspaper pulp and electrical wire. In a corner, piles of drawings of favorite trees sit tied with string. Drawn by various people on translucent velum, the images layer and merge together.

Common things are presented here as rare and worthy

of study. We are left to ask: Whose cabinet of curiosities is this? Is this a view

of our future?

This solo show is strengthened by the range of work and the conceptual interplay among the artworks. Along the wall are a series of Backes' exquisite paintings, made with the precision of botanical illustrations but with a heightened realism that is somehow expressive, too. They are very specific images of the surfaces of things, trees mostly, but resemble the microscopic, aerial views of landscape or the expanding cosmos.

"Tall Trees," a pair of bare, flesh-colored trees, sits on the gallery floor like mannequin hands on a department store glove counter. Though monumental, more than 7 feet high, they are wonderfully lithe and fragile.

In the rear of the gallery is the "Multi-Species" tree, which seems to crouch beneath the high ceiling and has roots that splay on the wood



"Tall Trees," a pair of bare, flesh-colored trees, sits on the gallery floor like mannequin hands on a department store glove counter.

floor like clinging animal claws. Fashioned from weathered architectural remnants, it has a sort of ancient presence. It conjures icons such as the tree of knowledge, a symbol of human curiosity, or the Bodhi Tree. As with the little pulp trees, Backes is restoring this organic matter to the forest, to its home.

To describe Backes' work as "eco art," as some have, would be to oversimplify. Though

themes of the planet's health are certainly present, I also find lots of room for personal discovery here. I am left with questions about how I intersect with nature and to what extent I am separated from or part of it.

Mary Louise Schumacher is the *Journal Sentinel's* art critic. Follow her on Facebook (www.facebook.com/artcity), Twitter (@artcity) and her blog: www.jsonline.com/artcity.