

Backes probes concept of 'Home'



Joan Backes, "Oak House, Stick House, Plexi Rod House" ©2012

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REVIEW

Shelter is the third need. Long understood as the final requisite for survival, after food and water, it is the primary subject of "Home," the exhibition by sculptor and mixed-media artist Joan Backes, currently on display at the Dedee Shattuck Gallery.

Building from the common iconic image of the triangular roof atop a simple square, the "house-shaped" house that kindergarteners learn to draw, without regard to perspective, Backes works with a wide variety of materials and a range of scale that challenge easy notions and raise fundamental questions. Why does this house glyph resonate in the collective cultural consciousness? Perhaps even more so than those two other basic needs – food and water – the concept of shelter, here manifested as a house, or more accurately "home" – is loaded with meaning and memory and expectation. It conjures thought of the communion of family, the necessity of solitude, and the desires for protection, warmth and place.

"Pink Neon House," mounted in the gallery's front room, is exactly what the title indicates. Neon, stripped away from the trappings of commercial application, is a playful choice, and the

fluorescent pink happily glows. It is a fitting start to the exhibition as it there is something nostalgic about it, a little girl's princess fantasy of a magic home in her future.

A trio of small structures, "Oak House, Stick House, Plexi Rod House," work as a miniature neighborhood, all in the same scale but executed in materials as different as the stick house/wood house/brick house dichotomy of the three little pigs of fairy tale fame. It reminds one of the commonness of need, and the desire to fulfill that need with sense of the unique self.

"Two Stilt Houses," one of stick and one of finished oak, sit tall, reminiscent of the homes built on coastal communities, where the threat of flood could negate the concept and actuality of home, lest creative thinking and construction come into play.

It has been suggested that the proliferation of ceramic gnomes, artificial deer, and carved bunny rabbits across the lawns of suburbia reflect a subconscious desire to return to a long-lost connection to magic and nature. Zoos, too, can be understood as a manifestation of the want to be closer to the wildlife that is not longer a common element in the lives of most contemporary peoples.

Taking the concept of home in a vastly different and enthralling direction, Backes explores the zoo as metaphor for the protection, salvation, destruction and imprisonment of the animal kingdom.

In "Bamboo House," Backes has created a cage within a cage within a cage. The outer walls are a grid of bamboo poles, tied with grassy vine. Within that, vertical bars of the same material form a smaller enclosure. Finally, a tertiary cell also employs a grid structure. Each of the cage units stands taller than the one that visually proceeds, creating a series of rising Gilligan's Island-style thatched roofs, tiered like a wedding cake.

Inside the most interior cage are stick-mounted cutouts of endangered species: rhinoceros, tiger, wallaby, and others. This has become their home, and the viewer is frustrated by an ability to get more intimate, to get closer. Metaphorically, that home is that connection, lost in the modern world.

"Joan Backes: Home" will be on display at the Dedee Shattuck Gallery until Aug. 14.

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