

ENTERTAINMENT ([HTTP://WWW.KANSASCITY.COM/ENTERTAINMENT/](http://www.kansascity.com/entertainment/))
> VISUAL ARTS ([HTTP://WWW.KANSASCITY.COM/ENTERTAINMENT/VISUAL-ARTS/](http://www.kansascity.com/entertainment/visual-arts/))

Plastic straws, onion bags and bubble wrap sound environmental messages in sculpture show at Epsten Gallery

BY NEIL THRUN - SPECIAL TO THE STAR
06/17/2014 2:44 PM | Updated: 06/17/2014 5:33 PM



Karen McCoy's "Seemingly Unconnected Events" features strange, tubular, burned plaster worms and plaster casts of plastic packaging. E. G. SCHEMPF

Ecology and recycling are central themes in "(Re)imagine," an exhibit of large-scale sculptural works by Karen McCoy, Miles Neidinger and Matt Jacobs, curated by Heather Lustfeldt at the Epsten Gallery.

McCoy's "Seemingly Unconnected Events" comprises plaster casts of plastic packaging contrasted by strange, tubular, burned plaster worms. The 2½ inch-diameter charred worms are modeled after a much smaller sea worm, the tiny *Hydroides dianthus*. To make them, McCoy creates a paper mold by rolling and binding newspaper into tubes, which she fills with plaster. She then burns off the paper mold, yielding worms with an organic, rough, natural feel.

Alongside and underneath the oversized worms are smooth, clean, white plaster casts of plastic packaging for everything from light bulbs to metal shears. These casts resemble the objects the packaging held but are oversized and almost cartoon-like.

Accompanying the installation is an audio track of beeping supermarket checkouts and the slow surge of tidal waves.

Off to the side of "Seemingly Unconnected Events," McCoy has a display explaining the conceptual underpinnings of the artwork. A small glass case contains specimens of actual *Hydroides dianthus*, now calcified, dead and caked to the inside of a seashell. As our oceans have become more acidic and polluted, creatures such as this sea worm are now endangered. By

joining together the sea worm and human consumerism, the tides and the checkout line, McCoy wants to show how our terrestrial activities affect, and kill, creatures in the depths of the ocean.

McCoy has an established reputation as an artist concerned with ecology. Many of her works have addressed other environmentalist themes, but she has also taught this combination of artistic practice and ecological activism as a professor at the Kansas City Art Institute's sculpture department. Miles Neidinger (2000) and Matt Jacobs (2010) were her students there.

Neidinger's sculpture "Artifice of Ornament" is a large construction of electrical conduit, foil tape and plastic straws. Standing more than 10 feet tall, and with a similarly large footprint, the maze of tubing and conduits is a rainbow of bright oranges, pinks and yellows.

In a statement, Neidinger compares the artwork to a childhood experience in which his parents remodeled their house, tearing down walls and exposing the interior skeleton of the home.

Using repurposed and recycled materials, Neidinger's sculpture is not only a literal example of an environmentalist idea, it also illustrates a bigger historical shift of industry replacing nature. Whereas sculptors of centuries past used wood, stone or raw metals to make their artworks, it is today easier and cheaper to find industrial, manufactured things like straws and conduit than a large piece of raw stone.

Much like a caveman painting with dirt pigments on cave walls, today's artists find themselves living in and utilizing the "raw materials" of a much more synthetic, industrial, "natural environment." This shift from nature to industry is also evident in the work of Matt Jacobs.

His "Backwards Painting 18 (Iron Mike)" is created by pouring acrylic paint onto bubble wrap, backing the paint with the plastic mesh of Iron Mike's brand onion bags, and then pulling the dried paint from the bubble wrap. The resulting painting is a shiny, bubbly, black, sludgy abstraction backed on the orange fibers of the onion bags.

Primitive, totemic and very raw, Jacobs' painting brings to mind those ancient cave paintings, with their use of irregular stone surfaces and imperfect chalky pigments. While made in the 21st century, it's easy to imagine this painting being the work of an artist in some sci-fi, Mad Max-esque wasteland.

Jacobs' other work in the exhibition, "It Aint Easy Being Green," reads like a post-apocalyptic billboard cobbled together out of discarded Plexiglas and scrap lumber, painted in noxious thick green paint. The imperfections of the work and its abject ugliness challenge the fashionable notions of "being green." Jacobs asks a tough question: Are we willing to recycle, reuse and reduce, even if it means being gross?

It would be an exaggeration to say that "(Re)imagine" is breaking new ground in either art or ecology, but this doesn't detract from the necessity or urgency of its message.

How long until our planet looks like something out of a Hollywood dystopia? How long until all our beaches are trash heaps and bone yards? Environmentalists, scientists and politicians often speak of a coming

environmental catastrophe, of a “Sixth Extinction,” but unlike the hypothesized meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs, we will have to live side-by-side with this self-inflicted problem for decades, if not centuries.

ON DISPLAY

“(Re)imagine: Karen McCoy, Miles Neidinger, Matt Jacobs” continues at the Epsten Gallery at Village Shalom, 5500 W. 123rd St., Overland Park, through July 27. Hours are 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and 1-4 p.m. Sunday. For more information, 913-266-8414 or www.epstengallery.org (<http://www.epstengallery.org/home/>).