

Van Ryzin: San Marcos exhibit takes new look at American West

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BY JEANNE CLAIRE VAN RYZIN - AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

SAN MARCOS — The myth of the American West has always been a mighty, and mighty complicated, clarion call for visual artists.

And the residual echoes reverberate in two striking solo exhibits currently paired at Texas State University's gallery.



Though Eric Zimmerman's "West of the Hudson" and Yumi Janairo Roth's "Modifications and Adaptations" play with differing artistic strategies, the two shows nevertheless complement each other well — a testament to what thoughtful curatorship can do for a university's art department gallery, a sometimes overlooked art-viewing opportunity on any campus or in any community.

Formerly of Austin, now

based in Houston, Zimmerman presents us with what might be an archive — or really the remnants of an archive.

He offers us an array of found objects — petrified wood, a bobcat skull and a hunk of selenite rock. There's also a branch the artist collected from an empty lot in Houston displayed alongside a (very delightful) paper mâché copy of the branch.

On the walls are Zimmerman's meticulously rendered graphite drawings based on older National Geographic photographs, among them images of a noble soaring eagle and of a proud logger standing over an enormous felled tree. (The artist spends months on each drawing, carefully depicting every detail of a photograph.)

Throughout the gallery are stacks of zines the artist made, photocopied and stapled together and filled with poetry, found images, bits of texts and lists of words. (Yes, please take a copy of any of the zines.)

There's also a couple of diagrammatic charts filled with drawings and what seem to be a taxonomy for the concepts underpinning romantic American ideals, chiefly our tradition of exerting hegemony over the

natural world and other cultures — a tradition that continued well into contemporary times, as Zimmerman's National Geographic drawings suggest.

And with more than a little touch of humor, the artist also offers two drawings of 45 rpm records that make for bad puns for any consideration of the American West: Peter, Paul and Mary's "Blowin' in the Wind" and Duran Duran's "Hungry Like the Wolf."

In 2010, Zimmerman presented much the same pastiche of materials in a solo show at what was then the Austin Museum of Art — an exhibit that touched on such quintessential American characters as Thomas Jefferson and John F. Kennedy and events like early trips to the moon.

As he did with the previous exhibit, Zimmerman doesn't really cull any conclusions from all the information he's presenting with his real and ersatz documents and objects in "West of the Hudson."

Instead, he's more interested in the kind of contradictions and endless loops and incomplete narratives that inevitably occur when we try to define our experience and our nation's culture. We'd love to be able to wrap it up neatly, but we just can't.

For Roth, it's less about the American West than it is about contemporary issues such as global trade and labor that disrupt any romantic notions we may still have about Manifest Destiny.

Her re-imagined objects upend any expectations of what some quotidian objects mean and how they are intended to function.

A tough chain-link fence or an injury-inflicting stretch of barbed wire, the materials typically used to keep people out of places?

Roth makes them beautiful and monetarily valuable, fashioning both barriers out of gleaming sterling silver — a roll of the silver fencing shines on the gallery floor, while a twirl of the sterling barbed wire looks deceptively playful.

How about the ubiquitous wooden pallet, a workhorse item of global trade that most of us never consider? As with the fencing material, Roth beautifies the pallet. With a master artisan's delicacy she inlays mother of pearl on the wooden pallet with decorative, floral patterns that resemble Southeast Asian traditional folk art.

That delicate pearl inlay is hard to see unless you look closely at Roth's "Stacked Datsun." She has piled the wooden pallets to an almost impossible height in the back of homemade trailer, a contraption jerry-rigged from the bed of an old yellow Datsun pickup.

"Stacked Datsun" seems to say that somebody is toting precious cargo.

It's easy for us to forget the human labor on the other side of the world that produces so much of the material goods we use every day.

Smartly, Roth finds a way to make what's overlooked look beautiful.