

Area artists probe nature, comic reality

By Kevin Lynch

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FITCHBURG — Virtual reality began with visual painters and sculptors. Their skill fused with imagination to evoke the real world in a myriad of revelatory ways.

These days — as high technology joyrides us ever faster into hyper-real simulation — many visual artists continue to mine a more reflective relationship between the imaginative eye and the real world.

A superb group show at Promega Corp., 5445 E. Cheryl Parkway, shows a range of dimensions — both creative and literal — that artists work in today.

There's even a sharp jab at pop culture that crashes in on comic book reality like a Batman punch.

POW!
All the artists evoke the three-dimensional qualities of reality. Yet only one of the five is a sculptor. And none is remotely high tech.

Running through July 21, the showcase of Wisconsin artists is a large, generous and ambitious

offering from all five exhibitors. Curator Daniel Swadener has organized this with his usual sensitivity and dedication.

Four of the exhibits have titles suggesting a strong sense of place and nature: "Hail Eagle," "Field Notes II," "Ireland," "Construction Sights."

However, the work of DeForest artist Ross Johnston jumps out with a sharper, comic angle.

Titled "Barbicide," it features cartoonish drawings cut and layered into 3-D style constructions.

reads the headline.

But Barb's grieving gal pal Midge says: "I... I... can't believe it... I mean like..."

The daft spaciness of '60s style pop-out virtual reality also arises in Johnston's "Alien Invasion," in which an impatient cat peers between the big feet of his owner, who's zoned out on his bed, staring at a sci-fi TV movie and scary posters — and a monster in the window (of his mind?).

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The most unlikely artist to be working with a three-dimensional concept is watercolorist Virginia Huber of Madison.

Her series of "Construction Sights" actually explores construction sites, an improbably inspired subject for a watercolorist. It works, partly because of her judicious use of mixed-media collage elements. But Huber has had a lifelong interest in construction sites, since the post-World War II building boom in her native Washington, D.C.

"I sat as close to the sites as the foremen would allow," she recalls of her childhood.

Today she displays a lyrical fascination with how such heavy, hard structures fit in relation to the land and environment they occupy.

For example, you might start by looking at the painting called "Underground Spring," in which she depicts a spring — with fine, plastic netting — a quirky way to suggest its own "structural" energies, coursing below a building site.

Huber's work hardly condemns development; rather, it quietly advocates smart, earthwise decisions by everyone from the financier to the welder. Her scenes come full circle in a serene image of a snow-bound crane. "Winter Resting Pose" suggests how human progress must always give way to na-

Johnston mimics pop culture's style but suggests that it has an addictive influence. The fitness craze has many people narcissistically longing for comically sculpted hyper-selves — like Barbie and Sylvester "Rocky" Stallone.

The title work "Barbicide" shows that the Barbie doll, after years of being a little girl's fantasy plaything, has had it up to — here, Johnston has created a 3-D mock cover of a Hollywood tabloid, but the effect is close to a spoof from The Onion newspaper.

"Barbie Dead at 40!" the headline screams. The famous doll, who "is comparable to a 7-foot tall woman with measurements of 48-14-18," is discovered hanged from a noose in her '60s-style pad.

"Coroner to the Stars" Thomas Nōguchi "has ruled out suicide,"

ture's largest cycles and forces.

Huber shares an affinity with Mount Horeb photographer Doris Hembrough, who also keeps her eye close to the earth in exploring evocative spatial relationships.

Hembrough photographs rock formations that uncannily resemble organic bodies. But she is far more concerned with visual poetry than natural oddities.

As you peer at these color close-ups, you find yourself on a tour of natural forms photographed throughout the American West, Canada and Ireland. You sense the rock of ages in infinite variety.

In her artist's statement, Hembrough writes: "I photograph rocks as humans. They have seen all — heard everything. And the stones are there."

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In "Cold December Day," Madison artist Virginia Huber depicts a construction site with the unlikely medium of watercolors.

Promega

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Her anthropomorphism is utterly and gracefully convincing.

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Up on the gallery's gloriously sunlit second-floor balcony, Dousman artist Amy Cropper's sculptural objects and wall hangings are concerned with natural decay as loss, and the depths of imagining, in a very literary sense.

Her show, "Field Notes II," lovingly reinvents books as a form of communication and beauty.

Two large hangings are handsomely textured composites of pulp squares from old yellowing paperback books. In some squares, the pages and book titles are legible: "The Transit of Venus" and "Death Trap on the Platte."

Cropper concedes the impermanence of the book's form while inventively honoring the value of storytelling and the printed word.

She also displays two actual books, preserved in beeswax and scented with honey, as a sort of mummified myth — as precious as it is fragile, in a forgetful culture.

B.P. Barwick, of Madison, is the



Mount Horeb photographer Doris Hembrough saw these moss-covered rocks in Ireland as morphing into a giant foot.

most conventional, straightforward three-dimensionalist with his masterful bronze sculptures, including several bust portraits of American Indians.

"Hail Eagle" depicts a legendary warrior whose ancient visage is as weatherbeaten and knowing as Hembrough's rock facades. His-

tory has immeasurable depths in his face. He wears a bald eagle's head and wings as a headdress.

As they always have, humans move through and remake their reality by drawing from — or defying — the energy and fierce courage of nature, in all its wrath and wonder.