



Brian Mackey: Exhibit marries art, environmental issues

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Next time you go for a drive, take a glance at the side of the road. You'll see fast food wrappers, scraps of cardboard, pieces of tires.

To most of us, the discarded remnants of modern life are easily overlooked. But to Terrence Campagna and Karen Bondarchuk, they're the foundation for modern art.

Campagna and Bondarchuk are the featured artists in "Lay of the Land," an exhibition that closes Wednesday at the Visual Arts Gallery at the University of Illinois Springfield.

They won the juried competition in last year's "Sustain" show, in which each had entered one piece. Both will be on hand for a reception at the gallery from 5:30-8 p.m. Friday.

It's no coincidence that the reception is scheduled for Earth Day — the works make it impossible to avoid thoughts about environmental responsibility.

The first thing you'll see, even before you enter the gallery, are the huge, dead birds.

Bondarchuk created her larger-than-life sculptures from bits of tire she collected along Interstate 94 in Michigan. They're part of her "Corvus" series, named for the Latin word used to describe a genus of crows.

"The expired tire scraps reinforce the deathly prostration of these birds, while also evoking the failing automobile industry," Bondarchuk says in an artist's statement.

"As many families attempt to pick up the pieces of their lives after layoffs and plant closures, the roadside debris that I collect directly represents a bygone era of prosperity and livelihood in Michigan, Ontario and elsewhere in the Midwest."

Dead scraps from a dying industry are made into dead birds that represent a dying way of life: the blue-collar middle class.

Campagna's works line the walls of the gallery. They're big. One is 10 feet across and 8 feet tall. From far away — at least as far away as you can get in the confines of the UIS gallery — they have a strange beauty. Colorful rings interlock and overlap.

But as you move closer, the appearance becomes more grotesque: they're assembled from bits of paper, Styrofoam, rubber and plastic. Filthy, flattened cups from McDonald's and KFC are punctuated with plastic bottle caps.

Part of a project titled "On the Surface of the Midwest," Campagna collected the material during a walk from Ann Arbor, Mich., to Minneapolis, Minn. When he'd filled his pack, he'd ship the debris to a friend with a letter. That correspondence is a critical part of the work, with an excerpt posted next to each piece.

“Field Letter to Steve,” posted with “Crepuscule,” recounts a conversation with a young man on a Lake Michigan beach: “He said he was from Illinois and when I asked whereabouts, he said ‘Moline.’ I knew it was a small town because an old co-worker of mine was from Moline,” Campagna wrote.

“Then the teenager said he wasn’t really from Moline. ‘Moline’s all right, I’m actually from Davenport, it’s not so good, it’s rougher.’ I didn’t know exactly what he meant. I asked, ‘lots of fights and stuff?’ And he said ‘yah’ and was silent.”

Campagna’s numerous encounters with strangers remind us that roadside debris is not the only thing most of us zoom past and overlook in our daily travels.

The UIS Visual Arts Gallery is in Room 201 of the Health and Science Building. Regular hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday, but this week it will also be open from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Friday.

The reception begins at 5:30 p.m. Friday. Admission to the gallery and reception are free. For more information, call 206-6506 or visit www.uis.edu/visualarts.

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