

## Art reviews

# Photos in two exhibits show off nature and landscapes

The term "recontextualize" has been used frequently in art circles in recent years, its employment a way for artists of the postmodern era to describe art and experiences that differ from those seen in the past. Along with it comes questions:

What makes art and its viewing so different in these times? How can and should the accepted norms of modern art be reassessed? Finally, what does it mean to make art today and what exactly are the kinds of art that should be made?

"Regarding Nature" approaches these issues by having four local artists "manipulate the world, and recontextualize it within the gallery space." Jennifer Dorsey presents a topiary sculpture of an office cubicle; Olivia Lahs-Gonzales and Dean Kessmann display photographs of plants and insects via a toy microscope and a laptop computer, and plant detritus photographed in nature and then placed on the gallery floor; while Jerry Green contributes a digital audio manipulation of sounds produced by cicadas.

Nature as a subject has always been prominent in Western art, and one can even go back to cave paintings to make the point of its power and place in our lives. It's with nature that the idea of recontextualized things becomes an obvious fit for artists.

Entering the gallery, one can't escape the intense sound of Green's recorded cicadas, their tones repeated in various rhythmic cycles. This is our first evidence that the artists have attempted to bring the outside world indoors, and the unnerving sounds immediately transform a typically quiet gallery into a strange and living entity.

Dorsey's "Green Cube" also addresses the outdoor-indoor theme as she places her replication of a typical office cubicle into the exhibition space. The piece is perhaps the ultimate transformation of the typically bland and sterile office space — it is completely covered in plant life. Dorsey's work is admirable for its clever and humorous qualities, but it reminds us that the need for personal expression will always find its way into the most impersonal of human situations and places.

Lahs-Gonzales' inkjet photographs are more conventional but use modern-day technology to approach a subject that is just the opposite. Two series of photos are divided into the titles "10x" and

### "Regarding Nature"

**Where:** St. Louis Community College at Meramec, Humanities East Building, 11333 Big Bend Road;

**When:** Through March 29

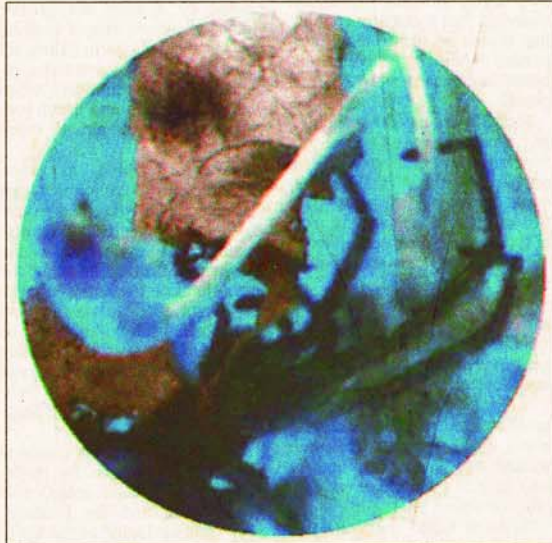
**Information:** 314-984-7632

"60x," which refer to the subjects' magnification. "10x" are small works that clearly offer the view of a microscopic world, a subject that has been a common trend of late — particularly in painting. By comparison, her "60x" series is a bit larger, making it easier to see the specific shapes, spaces, colors and textures. As a result, these images have a stronger connection to the subject of nature, and their strength is their appealing richness.

In contrast, Kessmann's photographs are just one element of his larger "Plant Detritus," an arrangement of dried plants, twigs, et al, on the gallery floor. This is a replication of the original subject found on sidewalks and streets. Kessmann documents the forms on site with a Polaroid camera, bags the materials, takes it to his studio, rearranges it to gain a likeness of his first sighting of it, then shoots a photograph of the material against a white backdrop. In the gallery are three variations of one subject that were originally perceived in three different contexts.

Kessmann has done a lot of work to stress the idea of recontextualizing, and his large studio photographs of the plant detritus would be impressive in their own right for their sense of texture and detail. But seeing the items in actual and illusory contexts makes the whole piece that much more unusual and enjoyable as a fully formed concept. The viewer is forced to think about what is real, where does the artist's hand come into play — and, most important, what is the function of a subject in the first place?

— Brian D. Smith



Untitled (2001) by Olivia Lahs-Gonzales