



VISUALART REVIEW

Jensen Gallery's Illuminating 'Murmurs in the Trees'

BY PEGGY SUE DUNIGAN

Wisconsin-born artist Joan Backes might be better known in the rest of the world than in her home state. She has had installations commissioned by institutions in Iceland, Finland, Germany, Sweden and Thailand, among others. It is a privilege to experience Backes' works in Milwaukee in the exhibition "Joan Backes: Murmurs in the Trees" at Dean Jensen Gallery.

Three years ago, Jensen curated an exhibition that featured a human-scale house that Backes constructed from newspaper. The gallery's current show builds upon Backes' past exhibitions and highlights the artist's intense devotion to nature, and trees, in particular.

Backes' 12-foot-high *Multi-Species Tree* (2009-2011) is formed from recycled wood, returning the material to its origi-

nal state—as a tree. In this premiere showing, Backes playfully wires plastic leaves in bright colors. The branches cast shadows on the gallery floors and walls, creating a nurturing, protective shelter for those who stand beneath the tree.

A mixed-media house installation, titled *Paper House* (2007), incorporates natural specimens with industrial elements and adds electricity. The walk-in structure, covered in recycled, shredded paper, welcomes visitors into Backes' artistic heart and home. After stepping through the door, viewers will see an interior featuring samples of amber, slices of fossilized bark and jars filled with acorns, dried leaves and seedpods.

The luminous quality of the house underscores the idea that nature illuminates human lives with beauty, shelter and sustenance. This concept is illustrated through the paper that covers the house. Made from trees, paper is regularly used and destroyed. Yet, on this house, reused white paper hangs from the door and window frames like a comforting blanket.

Backes' entire exhibition illuminates a love for the natural world. Through this extraordinary artwork, one senses common cycles in nature—the eternal rhythm of birth, death and rebirth. Further, the exhibit should cause humanity to examine its position in the natural world, and how human life positively or negatively alters these cycles.

"Joan Backes: Murmurs in the Trees" continues through May 28 at Dean Jensen Gallery.