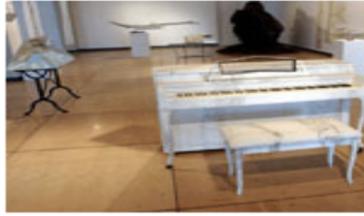


Two-artist exhibit makes note of relationship between art, nature

By Kurt Shaw, Tribune-Review Art Critic
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Melody

The installation 'Melody,' featuring recent work by Keiko Miyamori, is on display at the Society for Contemporary Craft.

I think I shall never see, A poem lovely as a tree. So begins the well-known poem "Trees," by American poet Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918). Although Kilmer died an early death while in action in France during World War I, he no doubt would have found kindred spirits in the two artists whose work is on display at the Society for Contemporary Craft in the Strip District — Keiko Miyamori and Dorothy Gill Barnes — for their works are poetry made with trees. That might sound like a bit of a stretch, but for Japanese artist Miyamori, who lives in Philadelphia, the relationship between her work and poetry can be quite literal. Especially in her latest installation piece, "Melody," which dominates half of the main exhibition space that she shares with Barnes, of Worthington, Ohio. Comprised of a typewriter and a piano surrounded by a series of large-scale charcoal rubbings of trees that Miyamori made on Japanese washi paper, the piece originally was conceived to involve a pianist and poet in live performance. Both would play or work in tandem, opposite each other, on the piano and typewriter respectively. Here, in this space, however, it is up to the visitor to make that connection by typing or playing the piano, Miyamori says, so that they can experience first hand the power of nature to transform these objects into works of art. "If people can imagine something good in this, in playing, then we can change the world even a little if we can imagine something nice," Miyamori says. The piano and typewriter have been covered with the tree rubbings on washi paper, which Miyamori has glued tightly to their surfaces with wheat paste. The entire surface of both have been covered except for the piano's keys and a few keys on the typewriter — the ones necessary to spell out the word "energy." Miyamori says she did this to emphasize the idea that nature stimulates energy. A concept, she says, that aligns itself with Eastern philosophy. "Eastern culture is very close with nature," Miyamori says. "I'm hoping that with this installation human creativity and wisdom will merge to create something positive." Behind Miyamori's installation, visitors will find several smaller objects similarly covered in the charcoal-rubbed paper such as a mug, baby bottle, picture frames and pencils — all of which play on our human presence in the natural world. But perhaps nothing says that more than the giant, gnarly-rooted tree stump that Miyamori also has installed in the space. The major part of a large-scale installation she completed last summer at Philadelphia's Project Room, Miyamori had the stump removed from a demolition site of a housing project near that gallery and spent the entire summer cleaning out the fragments of brick, metal and glass that were embedded between the roots. "I thought of the bricks that I pulled from the roots as the people who were kicked out from (the housing project)," Miyamori says. "They are also very tough. We don't worry about them. They can live very strongly." The remainder of the gallery is filled with the work of Barnes in what constitutes a separate exhibition entitled "Wood Work/Play." A veteran artist who has plied the craft of basket making for nearly 30 years, Barnes creates unique sculptures and vessel forms from the bark, branches and roots of various trees. Many of the 30 or so pieces on display are vessels, or variations on basket-like containers. Some are rather large, like "Elm Bark Box with Handle," which is as large as a mature tree trunk. Others are smaller, as in "Dark and Light Bark Group," which is a grouping of six containers, each roughly the size of a handbag, that have been made from the bark of white pine and black walnut trees. Most of the pieces, however, exist purely as sculptures, such as "Willow with Hickory Lacing" or "Found Underground," which incorporates basket weaving into the bark of a Mulberry tree root. Although pieces such as the latter one were created by trimming back the wood of a chosen cutting to let the bark extend enough to be braided, some of the pieces are planned way in advance, with Barnes cutting into live trees and waiting several months to several years for the natural healing process to yield results that she can work with. Those pieces, which she calls "dendroglyphs," were inspired by the many scars created in tree bark by animals and insects that mark them with horns, claws or teeth. To emphasize the connection, a large display case holding several examples of these natural occurrences has been included in the exhibition right alongside Barnes' "dendroglyph" pieces. As with all of her pieces, Barnes says that whatever the means of their creation, "I try to think of a way of making a form that presents that material well then I try to make up the particular process." Even though her work is mainly about process, overall it still places the inherent beauty of trees at the forefront. There is something profound in this. Something that already has been best summed up in the final stanza of Kilmer's poem: Poems are made by fools like me, But only God can make a tree.