

Chicago Tribune

'Inside the Outside' is hot, but not because of its stove
by Claudine Isé

January 16, 2014

The polar vortex has made this one of the chilliest Chicago winters on record, but it's not cold at all inside Joseph Grigely and Amy Vogel's show at Alderman Exhibitions, "Inside the Outside." That's partly due to the cozy, wood-burning stove the married artists have installed in the gallery, but it's also because their project here is fueled by the kind of warmth only good conversation can provide.

"Inside the Outside" is all about the ways in which nature and natural forms are represented culturally, from pine-scented air fresheners to bird-shaped Christmas tree ornaments to landscape paintings. But it's also about bringing the outside in. The more well-known of the two artists is Grigely, whose work will appear in this year's Whitney Biennial, yet there's no question that their exhibition is a collaboration through and through. And not just between Grigely and Vogel – the pair invited seven other artists to contribute works, and might add a few more later. Thus far, participants include Stephanie Brooks, Paula Hayes, Breehan James, Lou Mallozzi, Todd Norsten, Thomas Rapai, and David Schutter.

Grigely and Vogel are also spending a lot of time "inside" their exhibition, which can be viewed Saturdays from 11 a.m.-5 p.m., and by appointment on other days. Grigely, an avid fly-fisher, has set up a worktable for tying artificial flies, which are made from things like feathers, fur, and different colored tinsels and wires and can be intricately threaded together in countless ways – they're tiny sculptures, really. Just ask, and he'll show you a few different kinds. Indeed, Grigely's worktable, which Vogel jokingly described to me as his "lair," is the show's centerpiece, its hearth, if you will. That same workspace is also a work of art titled "Camp on the River Ruse." Its materials,



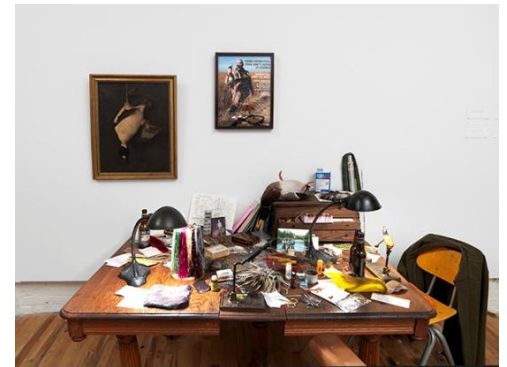
View of "Inside the Outside," 2013-2014, Alderman Exhibitions, Chicago. Joseph Grigely & Robert Burke tying flies.

according to the gallery checklist, consist of a table, chairs, fly tying materials, books, photographs, and "conversations." That's where you and I come in.

Conversations of a different sort take place between the show's wonderfully eclectic mix of artworks and more-or-less ordinary objects: paintings, sculptures, a sound art piece and various photographic images by Grigely, Vogel and the other artists, the aforementioned stove and worktable (which is also home to a taxidermy duck); an 1881 still life painting by Walter Robinson that depicts a dead fowl hanging upside from its webbed foot; a vitrine displaying a selection of flies tied by Fran Betters, W.W. Doak, Don Gapin and other innovative fly-fishers; and a balsam fir Christmas tree with metal ornaments shaped like birds and pine cones.

The exhibition's juxtapositions of the real and the fabricated, nature and the illusions we craft in hopes of recreating it, are inspired and also illuminating. For example: near the wood-burning stove sits a pile of logs. Some of those logs are made of wood, and some of them have been cast from wood in zinc. The wood ones will feed the fire, while the zinc ones will remain "Logs," a 2008 artwork by Vogel – I particularly like that for this show, she's put her sculptural logs in the same pile as functional ones. The stove has its own non-functioning counterpart across the room: a crystal urethane cast of a portable heater propped up on bricks made from the same material. Titled "We Need a Drinking Song," this piece by Grigely was inspired by a Tribune article he read a while back on the sociability of ice fishermen, who form close bonds with one another despite – or perhaps because of – the freezing temperatures.

The wood-burning stove radiates heat, while the sculptural stove suggests the warmth of a companionable sport. Near the latter piece hangs Grigely's close-up color photograph of an actual log cabin wall, the image itself framed with wood, which echoes James' photo-mural of a painted log cabin wall located on the landing downstairs. Next to Grigely's photo is Vogel's "Deer," a mounted mule deer's head, its branched antlers sporting bright orange knitted "gloves." Despite this absurdly unnecessary accessory, the buck remains uncannily handsome and its gaze, preternaturally piercing, despite the glass eyes.



View of "Inside the Outside," 2013-2014, Alderman Exhibitions, Chicago. Clockwise from top left: Walter Robinson, Goldeneye, 1881; Todd Norsten, This Isn't How it Looks, 2013; Joseph Grigely, Camp on the River Ruse, 2013. Photo: Tom Van Eynde.

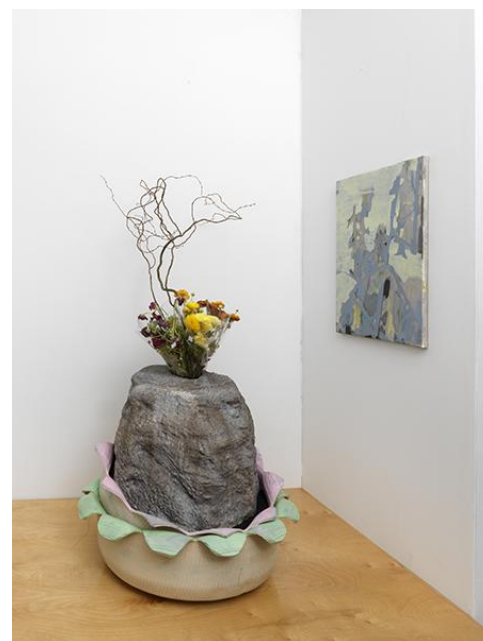
Around the corner, an abstract landscape by Vogel has been placed near her mixed-media sculpture "Vase," a large, lumpy vessel that looks sort of like a flower with a large boulder sticking out of its center. The vase holds a bouquet of flowers; on the day I visited, they were Green Spider Mums mixed with decorative twigs. It provides a kind of three-dimensional, living foreground to the painting's two-dimensional background, yet the surfaces of this painting and Vogel's others – fantastic all – appear to have been partially scraped or sanded down, so that from a distance they too look dimensional, like collages. Each of her abstractions teasingly denies our desire for "a perfect view" – there are none here, only different perspectives that pop in and out of focus depending on how long you look.

As "alive" as Vogel's paintings are, in the end, they're still objects – representations of nature that give rise to thoughts of the real thing. James's oil painting "Seagull Lake" does this too. I was told it was painted en plein air – i.e., outdoors, from life – something few fashionable painters do nowadays. James lovingly renders every leafless tree branch and ripple of water as an individual element distinct from its fellows – the result, no doubt, of spending many hours in their company. Next to this are two Schutter paintings, each one a glossary of greys particularized through Schutter's active brushwork. His overcast auras could be climatic, or they might represent internal states of mind.

Grigely, who is deaf, has long explored the ways in which audible communication manifests visually. In a sense, the reverse is happening with Mallozzi's punningly-titled audio piece "Chopping Clock," which plays every fifteen minutes on hidden speakers. Mallozzi recorded the sounds of a tree being cut down, editing out extraneous audio like bird chirps and passing cars. In this case, it is sound that gives form to a tree we can't see, and to the arc of that tree's toppling trajectory.

By the time you read this, the tree I did see in the gallery will likely have become kindling. "Inside the Outside" will probably have changed in other ways too. I was told the artists plan to bring in new objects and rearrange others, and may even retitling the show, all in the spirit of nature in flux. But one thing will surely stay the same: it'll still feel warm inside, and that always tends to make life outside seem rosier too.

"Joseph Grigely and Amy Vogel: Inside the Outside" is on view through February 15 at Alderman Exhibitions, 1138 Randolph St., 312-208-9001, aldermanexhibitions.com



Left: Amy Vogel, Vase, 2013, ed 1/3. Right: Amy Vogel, Untitled (Forest #6), 2013, oil on linen, 24 x 18 inches.