

Austin sculptor Shawn Smith creates a pixelated natural world

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By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin - American-Statesman Staff

He professes an unfamiliarity with the natural world, but nature has its way of inserting itself into the life of Austin sculptor Shawn Smith.



Austin sculptor Shawn Smith creates a pixelated natural world - photo Ralph Barrera

“I have no real relationship to nature,” he says, standing in Grayduck Gallery where his solo exhibit “Predators, Prey and Pixels” is on view through Oct. 18.

Growing up in Dallas, Smith, 43, explains that his was a very urban upbringing, not inclined to include camping trips or other outdoorsy fun. “My experience of the natural world pretty much came through television and computer screens.”

Yet, for the past decade, nature has been the core subject of his detailed, painstakingly crafted sculpture — each work made of thousands of tiny, hand-dyed wood cubes that are precisely assembled to create animals, often life-size or larger.

Smith sources images of animals online. Then — in a deliberately laborious process — he creates deft and whimsical mashups of the digital and the handmade.

Shawn Smith’s “Cheetah” is made of thousands of hand-dyed pieces of wood.

Each sculpture is plotted out in a carefully executed hand drawing on graph paper. Each wooden cube is cut and painted by hand, sorted by hue into tidy little containers in Smith’s studio.

Often, before drawing out the detailed plan for each sculpture, Smith will use a dated — and therefore technologically cruder — 1996 version of the photo-editing software Photoshop to enlarge an image to pixel level.



Austin artist Shawn Smith meticulously builds pixelated sculpture made of tiny cubes of wood.

“The way that I work by hand is a direct contrast to the speed and slipperiness of the digital world,” Smith says. “I’m being deliberately analog in the way I use digital source material. Pixels distort and distill details — bits of information are lost. And I’m trying to understand how each pixel plays a role in the identity of an object and the image of that object.”

Smith’s life-size sculpture of an impala appears simply brown in color on a quick glance, though a closer inspection reveals cubes in varying shades of yellow, orange, red, pink, green and brown.

Its hooves kicked up and back arched, the impala is “pronging,” a defensive action a prey animal makes when confronted by a predator, Smith explains.

Down the gallery wall from the impala hangs a gazelle, and down from it a racing cheetah, its spotted coat a blur of mustard gold, shades of charcoal and black and buffered yellow tones.

A cheetah chasing a gazelle and an impala down the gallery wall creates “a visual sentence about predator and prey,” Smith says.

Elsewhere in the gallery, a shark stares down a puffer fish, and the busts of a male and a female cardinal face off.

Recently, Smith has begun experimenting with 3-D printers. One sculpture on exhibit features a human spinal column topped with a brain — subject matter lifted straight from an anatomy textbook though rendered half in smooth polymer plastic and half in Smith’s signature wood cubes, as if in the midst of morphing into or out of pixelation.

“I’m curious about the evolution of the digital world,” he says. “Is it evolving by itself or are we — is nature — co-evolving with it?”

For all its conceptual groundings, Smith’s work is very much about its own materiality.

“I’m an object-maker,” he says. “I’ve always liked making actual things.”

As an undergraduate, he specialized in printmaking in the art program at Washington University in St. Louis, then completed a master’s degree in sculpture at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. Smith landed in Austin in 2007, priced out of the Bay Area and wanting to be closer to family in Dallas.

Though he has exhibited extensively around the country and been included in group exhibitions in Austin, the Grayduck show is Smith’s first solo exhibit in town. Next month, he heads to France for a solo show at Galerie Mark Hachem in Paris.

Anecdotes about his life as a homeowner in Northwest Austin pop up during a discussion of his art-making.

Nature, it seems, doesn’t like to leave Smith alone.

Soon after he and his wife, modern dancer Ann Berman, moved in, a raccoon came through the dog door and stole their dogs’ bed.

Inheriting a backyard pond from the previous homeowner, Smith at first tried to relocate the pond’s bellowing bullfrogs, only to find that they kept returning.

Finally, a deer birthed a fawn in the couple’s hilly front lawn.

Says Smith: “I don’t know what it is about me that these things keep happening. I don’t have any real experience with nature.”

“Predators, Prey and Pixels”

When: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday through Oct. 18

Where: Grayduck Gallery, 2213 E. Cesar Chavez St.

Cost: Free

Information: 512-826-5334, grayduckgallery.com

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