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## A Roaring River in the Northwoods

Thu, 07/27/2017 - 2:21pm – Rachel Bruya

If a tree falls in the Northwoods, does anyone hear it? I've often thought of how this philosophical question applies to a visual art practice, and it often makes me wonder what kind of artwork occurs in the Northwoods of Wisconsin. Does anyone see it?

I'm happy to answer with a resounding, *Yes!* A nonprofit called [ArtStart](#) opened its doors in Rhinelander a few years ago with a mission to "inspire, challenge and educate through cultural events and highly-distinctive, curated visual art exhibitions." ArtStart teamed up with the city to transform the historic federal building in downtown Rhinelander into a vibrant cultural center with two gallery spaces, a flexible space for events, and several private music practice rooms. Every year ArtStart has a fantastic line-up of group and solo art exhibitions, and this summer they are showcasing several Wisconsin artists through an exhibition titled, *A Tiny Rivulet in the Distant Forest*.



Liz Miller's eye-popping installation in "A Tiny Rivulet in the Distant Forest"

Curated by Michael Velliquette, *A Tiny Rivulet in the Distant Forest* features twenty-three artists, many of whom either live in Wisconsin or have Wisconsin roots. Velliquette is a visual artist himself, but has also branched out to curatorial work in the past few years. Like Velliquette's other projects, *A Tiny Rivulet in the Distant Forest* is colorful and energetic, and his curatorial placement keeps visitors on their toes and excited to see each piece.



Rafael Francisco Salas's "Blue Truck (minor key)"

The exhibition fills both of ArtStart's galleries, and, though Liz Miller's eye-popping installation will grab your attention as you walk in the door, Velliquette recommends starting your journey in the opposite gallery. As you enter, you will see Rafael Francisco Salas's *Blue Truck (minor key)*, which Velliquette thinks of as the starting point of your journey. From there, roll down the windows, kick back and enjoy the ride. Michelle Grabner's circle-shaped, picnic blanket-inspired paintings, John Kowalczyk's *Lifeless Vests*, Trina May Smith's road sign paintings, Riley Robinson's endless inner tube, Jordan Acker Anderson's diner placemat mixed media piece, and Andrea Ferrigno's full-spectrum gouache paintings all lightly reference Wisconsin and remind me of the joys of summer.



From left to right: Jordan Acker Anderson, Mollie Oblinger, Geoffrey Todd Smith, Claire Stigliani, John Kowalczyk, Riley Robinson (foreground)

It is hard not to notice thematic connections between many of the works and the thoughtful placement guides the visitors to notice the formal connections as well. For example, Jeremy Wineberg's reflective, UFO-like *Horizons and Accretions* fills an entire wall and is situated just a few feet from a miniature world tucked inside a glitter-covered, hanging orb. Both seem to defy gravity, yet each uses drastically different materials and means to convey this sense. Trent Miller's quiet ink drawings of everyday scenes seem to converse with Scott Espeseth's ink drawings and Leslee Fraser's found-object tableaux. While subject matter links these pieces, it is delightful to see how the artists are mastering the emotive quality within their works.



L to R: Gyan Shrosbree, Andrea Ferrigno, Trina May Smith.

Velliquette says most of the artists in *A Tiny Rivulet in the Distant Forest* are around the same age and all have had established studio practices for ten or more years. Rather than choosing a curatorial theme and then selecting the artists, Velliquette first selected the artists and then began a conversation with each artist, and the theme and curatorial vision gradually emerged (in the interest of full disclosure, I am also a visual artist and have artwork in the exhibition). Velliquette is also quite pragmatic: he made sure there were things on the floor, things on the wall, things hanging from the ceiling; vertical things and horizontal things; colorful things; monochromatic things; representational things; abstract things, and so on. From there the show was laid out in broad strokes describing a showcase of artists whose work deals with the nature of matter, sensation, perception, reaction, and consciousness.



Caption: at right, Jeremy Wineberg and foreground, Rachel Bruya.

The show title is suggestive of the idea that there is a common rivulet flowing through these galleries. Though this idea relates, Velliquette borrowed the phrase from a 1939 article written by a mid-20th century scientific thinker named Abraham Flexner. Titled "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge," the article provides Flexner's discourse on the value of pursuing scientific research for its own sake, free of concerns regarding its value or concrete application. Flexner suggests that these seemingly discrete areas of research often coalesce over time into greater scientific breakthroughs. He likens the process to tiny rivulets in distant forests, gradually swelling in volume to create streams.

With ArtStart and their *A Tiny Rivulet in the Distant Forest* exhibition, Wisconsin is developing a roaring river in the Northwoods. I urge you to visit Rhinelander soon!

#### Exhibiting Artists:

- Jordan Acker Anderson
- Josh Anderson
- Lynda Barry
- Rachel Bruya
- Scott Espeseth
- Joey Fauerso
- Andrea Ferrigno
- Leslee Fraser
- Michelle Grabner
- John Kowalczyk
- Shane McAdams

- Liz Miller
- Trent Miller
- Mollie Oblinger
- Riley Robinson
- Rafael Salas
- Gyan Shrosbree
- Geoffrey Todd Smith
- Trina May Smith
- Claire Stigliani
- Michael Velliquette
- Hilary Wilder
- Jeremy Wineberg

**SUBJECT TAGS:** *contemporary art*

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## CONTRIBUTORS



**Rachel Bruya**

Rachel Bruya is an artist who also writes.

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Overture Center for the Arts, 3rd Floor  
201 State Street • Madison, WI 53703  
608-265-2500