

Nature is everywhere, including artist's Brookside yard

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Artist A. Bitterman's "Point of Interest | Homo Vulgaris" is a re-created national park-style exhibit on his lawn, complete with a map of rock columns and illustrations of resident fauna.

The name A. Bitterman conjures up the image of a grouchy old man yelling at pesky neighborhood kids to stay off his yard.

But Kansas City artist A. Bitterman, who, along with his wife, five children and family cat, inhabits a two-story house on a tree-lined street in Brookside, has transformed his yard into a witty and thought-provoking art installation.

People are welcome to tramp upon the grass for a closer look at the funniest — and gutsiest — work produced recently by a local artist.



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For "Point of Interest," Bitterman painstakingly re-creates a national park-style informational exhibit on his lawn, complete with a map of stratigraphic rock columns and illustrations of resident fauna.

A handy take-away site map outlines the path of the "Upper Lawn View Trail,"

which winds around the front yard, across the sidewalk and past the front porch and picnic table. Trail length measures .017 of a mile; the brochure suggests skilled hikers walk the loop 40 times for a full mile.

Visitors may fill out a Back Country Permit Request Form to gain access to the “Upper Lawn View Spur” (aka the backyard) from 5 to 8:30 p.m. Mondays through Fridays.

If the idea of putting the type of exhibit you’d find near a Grand Canyon overlook in a front yard in Brookside sounds absurd, it is.

Bitterman uses humor and imitation to encourage people to reconsider nature and their relationship to it. The installation is so unexpected that it gives passers-by reason to pause and to think.

The artist uses text on the metal plaque in his exhibit to get his point across: “Sometimes we travel long distances so that we can be in nature. We confuse nature for the natural world, and this has generated a kind of madness.”

“Point of Interest” demonstrates that we don’t have to drive to a park to find nature. It’s in and on our lawns. The mosquitoes (which are definitely present at “Point of Interest”), the spiky sweet gum balls, even the visitors are all a part of nature. In Bitterman’s conception, human beings are not separate from the natural world. We live as part of it everyday.



The permit box for A. Bitterman's back yard.

Bitterman is also interested in the ways humans use scale to make some things

important and other things not so important.

“Scale creates meaning, allows us to focus on this and not that (which is why it is sometimes mistaken for size),” he wrote in an email interview.

“Point of Interest” treats an average front yard with the same amount of importance as a treasured natural wonder. The scale is off. Bitterman creates this imbalance on purpose to draw attention to the ways in which we place value on certain types of landscapes.

“What do we see here?” he inquires in his statement on the metal plaque. “A system, and our place in it. A house and a yard in a row of houses and yards, in the middle of a city filled with houses and yards.”

The work was funded by an Andy Warhol Foundation Rocket Grant, administered by Kansas City’s Charlotte Street Foundation and KU’s Spencer Museum of Art. In 2007, Bitterman was the co-creator of a giant banana for the Avenue of the Arts.

Bitterman further explores the idea of scale and the role it plays in the creation of meaning in “Lot 18,” an exhibit at the Subterranean Gallery, a space operated in a basement apartment inhabited by recent Kansas City Art Institute graduate Ayla Rexroth.

Like “Point of Interest,” “Lot 18” is part of the artist’s “Home(Land) Art” series, inspired by Land Art, an art movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s in which artists created monumental installations in remote locations, often incorporating elements of the landscape such as dirt and rocks.

In May 2009 and 2010, Bitterman climbed onto the roof of his house and lay there naked as aerial photographer Jon Blumb shot photos from a low-flying airplane.

Bitterman used those images to create the photographic prints and a video on display at Subterranean.

The images purposefully transgress notions of proper neighborly decorum and behavior. When recalling the photo shoot, Bitterman described hiding behind his chimney between flyovers when his neighbors passed by

For “Lot 18,” Bitterman also built a roof-like structure in a corner of the basement gallery, covered with the same red shingles that appear on the roof in his photographs.

He covered the ceiling with translucent photographic prints. Visitors must sit or lie on the faux roof to get a better look, all the while occupying the same position as the artist in his photographs.

In “Lot 18,” Bitterman pokes fun at the grand, art historical narrative of Land Art taught in textbooks. Instead of seeking out a secluded, unused parcel of land to create a masterpiece, the artist uses his own tiny plot of land in the middle of a metropolitan area.

With “Lot 18” and “Point of Interest,” Bitterman presents an ambitious, complex and intimate body of work.

Those who follow future installments of his engaging “Home(Land) Art” series will get to know him — and get to know themselves — better.

The shows •“Point of Interest” continues at 14 W. 66th St. through July 30. Hours are 9 a.m. to dusk; closed during rain. For more information, visit www.natureand systems.com.

•**“Lot 18: New Work by A. Bitterman”** continues at the Subterranean Gallery, 4124 Warwick Blvd. Apt. B, through July 1. Open by appointment; call 309-230-7115 or send email to [subterranean gallery@gmail.com](mailto:subterranean_gallery@gmail.com).

<http://www.kansascity.com/2011/06/22/2965789/nature-is-everywhere-including.html>