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TIP OF THE WEEK

"Chicago Artists '99 runs through July 31 at Gallery 312, 312 North May, (312)942-2500.



It would be simplistic to argue that most of the art in a scene as large and varied as Chicago's is cut from the same cloth, but there are some threads that are more prominent than others, and more prominent here than elsewhere. Among them is a sense of humor. From the Imagists in the sixties and seventies, who injected painting with a sexy playfulness, to the eighties conceptualists who found levity in an often humorless genre, Chicago artists have kept viewers smirking. Gallery 312's sixth annual exhibition of "emerging and under-represented" artists promises to stave off dour moroseness a bit longer. Donald Stahlke's Bigfoot collages from "The Wildman Project" feature photographs of people with fur carefully affixed to their surfaces, posing in the woods in the company of poodles and the like. Oli Watt's studies in absurdity include photographic documentation of a "Minor Tow" (a real tow truck hauling away an illegally-parked pink plastic Barbie car) and "U-Haul Nation," a moving van with a landscape painted on its side to match the background. Joel Ross's piece also takes the form of documentation in an absurd/obsessive action, with a grid of 100 snapshots of a Chicago bungalow taken from the artist's truck, "I Drove Around Your Block 100 Times." Other works, such as Christopher Russell's photographs of teenagers' love letters and Mark Booth's abstracted text paintings "Pictures for Elephants," are not necessarily humorous, but round out an exhibition that rises far above the level of many such "emerging-artist" shows. (Ann Wiens)