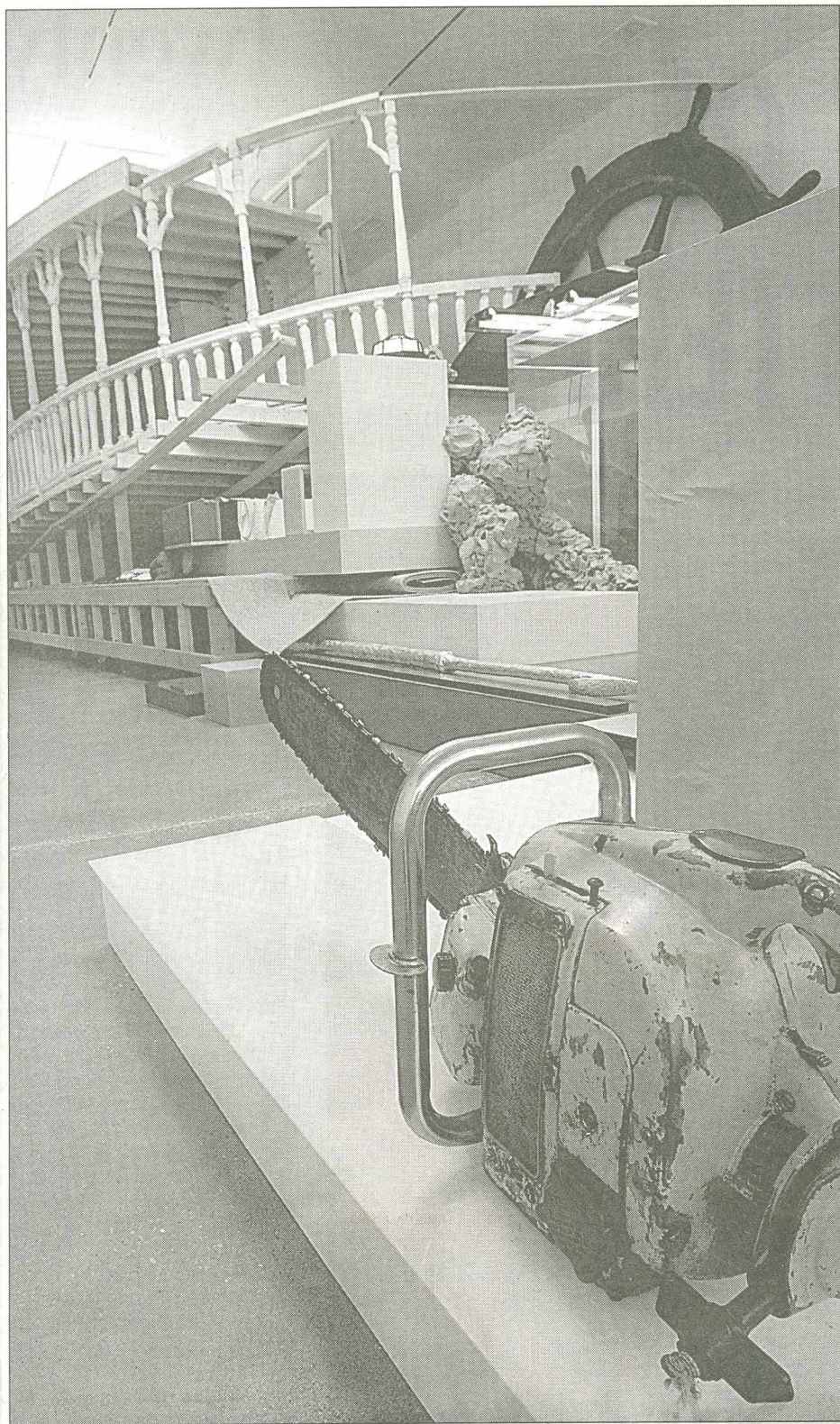


## VISUAL ARTS

## All aboard for a full deck of art

**'Riverboat' installation is grand show at Grand Arts.**

By ALICE THORSON  
The Kansas City Star

An elaborate installation by Houston-based Michael Jones McKean may be the Grand Arts gallery's most eccentric project to date.

Its cryptic title, "Riverboat Lovesongs for the Ghost Whale Regatta," sets the stage for a challenging show.

Just inside the front door, the exhibit begins with a breeze issuing from a huge fan mounted overhead. Around the corner, a 40-foot-long partial re-creation of a weathered riverboat, set on a wood platform, runs the length of the main gallery.

The white-painted structure has an abandoned ghostly air, like something tossed up on a wave of American nostalgia.

A below-deck space toward the front of the craft contains articles of clothing and three papier-mache masks that evoke remnants of the drowned. Behind them colored sheets of Plexiglas inject a minimalist note amid all this maritime romanticism.

A platform extending from the bow displays seemingly unrelated objects, including a golden harpoon, a boom box and a chainsaw dripping fresh oil. Serving as backdrop to these objects is a large aquarium filled with water fronted by a lumpy mass of clay.

Behind the aquarium, a giant wood wheel leans against the wall next to a collection of pylons and barrels. Beside them, partly hidden behind the boat, is a flat crowded with small plants under a grow light. More items are bunched in the front corner, including a golden saxophone, sword and conquistador's helmet.

There's live action in the adjacent smaller gallery, where McKean has constructed a large plywood box containing a lighted cabin, repeatedly dashed by rain.

Depending on your timing, a large and visible sound system across from this "storm chamber" plays a dirge by the legendary saxophonist Albert Ayler — or tracks by Hall & Oates.

McKean, whom some may remember for his wacky Barney Allis Plaza installation for the 2004 Avenue of the Arts, can talk a blue streak about the new project's various components and the ideas and experiences that inspired them. These include Ayler's mysterious

**'RIVERBOAT LOVESONGS'**

**"Michael Jones McKean: Riverboat Lovesongs for the Ghost Whale Regatta."** The show continues at the Grand Arts, 1819 Grand Blvd., through Oct. 21. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday and Friday; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday. Call (816) 421-6887 for information.

drowning in the East River in 1970 and conquistador Hernando de Soto's equally mysterious death by water following his unsuccessful search for gold. (Key the gold swords and helmets in front of the boat.)

McKean's memories of a whale-watching trip during an artist residency in Provincetown, Mass., also factor in, as does his research into the riverboat's role in slavery and Manifest Destiny.

He can also wax at length about the problematic relationship of reality and representation, an issue that has taxed philosophical minds since Plato put forth his idea of the Cave.

"You know you're never going to be able to represent (anything), but there's this poetry in trying to do it," McKean said.

Don't go looking here for a coherent concept or narrative — the piece is more fruitfully approached as a series of attempted representations, whose proximity yields a variety of poetic collisions.

Viewers can explore the roots of the show's stories and motifs in a set of metal binders, placed inconspicuously on the floor across from the gallery office. The information contained therein, including extensive material about the fateful sea voyage of Donald Crowhurst, the lyrics of Hall & Oates' songs and reams on riverboat history and design, add depth rather than clarity to the venture.

You get everything here: formal invention, craft, ideas and emotion. It doesn't gel but rather ripples around the themes of quest, failure and watery death.

So is McKean engaging in self-indulgent intellectual abdication, or is he pioneering a new paradigm?

Only time will tell, but it all makes for a pretty fascinating wait.

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JIM BARCUS | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

A 40-foot-long partial re-creation of a riverboat runs the length of the main gallery at Grand Arts. "Riverboat Lovesongs for the Ghost Whale Regatta" also includes a platform filled with seemingly unrelated objects.