

Ahoy, Mates

Michael Jones McKean has Mark Twain on the brain.

In the poetically titled *Riverboat Lovesongs for the Ghost Whale Regatta*, the Houston artist imaginatively re-creates romantic nautical scenes and lets the viewer in on his secrets. Though it's a convoluted and expansive tale that McKean tells, this is one of the most creative installations we've encountered.

BY RAY T. BARKER

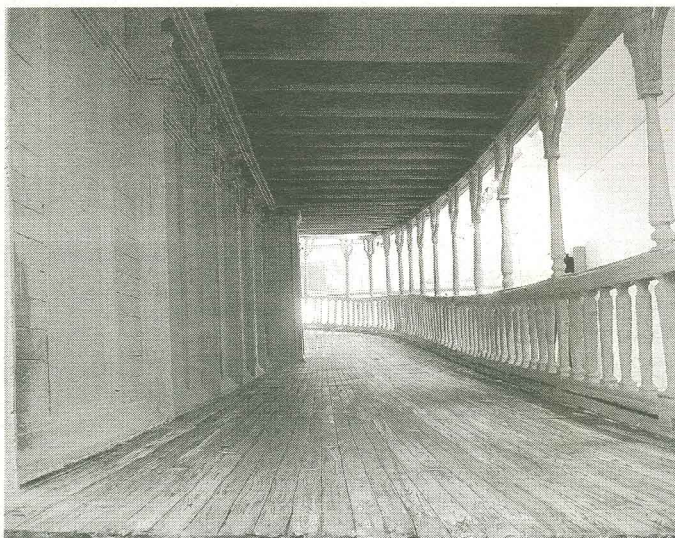
As if it has magically passed through time, a Mississippi riverboat deck, circa 1860, juts out of the south wall of the Grand Arts Gallery. It's an immense 40 feet long and rests on a large wooden riser. The boat's body is coated with gobs of polystyrene, joint compound and acrylic paint, like white frosting on a giant, weird cake for a steamboat lover's birthday.

Piled up unassumingly at the far side of the boat are several articles of period clothing. A homemade sweater, a shirt, a wool cap, and a yellow waterproof jacket and pants are left on deck as if a historical re-enactment has just ended, the clothes discarded and forgotten.

Then there's a large, clear acrylic tank filled with water. A piece of blue plastic leans sloppily against the back to suggest a small, man-made ocean. It's impossible to get lost in the artifice, though, thanks to the chainsaw and boom box that are obviously, almost embarrassingly, out of place and time. McKean's work insists that viewers look behind the scenes. Beyond the water tank, we find fluorescent lights spread about, rows of plants growing, and a spaghetti pile of extension cords and wires, all of the artist's tricks exposed.

McKean loves to arrange things, forcing viewers to contemplate the objects' apparent relationships to one another. The period clothes, the mysterious clay figure leaning on its side nearby, an oversized paddleboat steering wheel, a gilded banjo, a jug, a trumpet, a harpoon, some coins, a few face masks — they're all composed to convey a story that we must piece together ourselves.

In the smaller adjacent gallery, behind a narrow slit cut out for viewing, a weathered wooden deck shifts and lists as make-believe rain and ocean water pour from the corner ceiling. Under this unending waterfall, the remarkably



authentic captain's house gives off a haunted glow from within. Deck boards are bruised and broken, and the air smells of wet wood, recalling a scene straight out of *Moby Dick*. Yet we hear motors controlling the deck's motions and the rainfall, so we know where the drama comes from: a row of breaker boxes, identified in scrawled handwriting as "rocking deck" and "mist." (The wall of speakers playing a Hall and Oates tune from an iPod is probably best left a mystery.)

McKean takes great pains to reveal the work behind the work, to demonstrate that his artistic illusions have a modern source to be considered as much as the art itself. This dense, complex work comes across as

**Michael Jones McKean:
Riverboat Lovesongs for
the Ghost Whale Regatta
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part historical rendering — the type of thing that one would hope to find in some cool museum — and part childhood dream of escape.