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## Hair she goes

For artist Leah Brown, the line separating dreams from reality is hair-thin.

By Colleen Dougher

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# Hair she goes

For artist Leah Brown, the line separating dreams from reality is hair-thin. By Colleen Dougher



City Link Wednesday, April 20, 2011 - citylinkmix.com

"When I was young, I had a hard time distinguishing dreams from reality."



Come to mama: The artist nuzzles "Caterbaby," which she created partly from hair weaves.

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region's vanishing history," Brown explains. "Hidden beneath the vines are relics of people overcome by their surroundings, their homes reduced to inaccessible spaces whose hidden rooms haunt my dreams."

Brown discusses these characters as if they are friends or relatives. "I have these place-triggers in my dreamscape that let me know when I'm in These Woods," she says. "In last night's dream, that trigger was a rural farmhouse in the armpit of a wisteria vine, like

a clenched fist. It's a place I've dreamt of before. The dream gets lucid for a minute as I realize where I am, and I know I have to pay attention, to remember. ... A big part of understanding a story is knowing the lay of the land, so it is important to find ways to internally map it. Pigman and Wolfie are denizens of this land. They are wild things with lithe, delicate, precise movements. They are beyond the desire to reconfigure themselves according to the laws of nature and are beyond even seeing themselves as monstrous. I hid them in an abandoned barn in the middle of kudzu country last night. They will be safe there for the time being."

Brown bases her works, such as those in *Clinging Vines Cannot Stand Alone*, on these dreams. She continues to revise her sculptures, often moving them from one installation to another, as if they were actors in search of the perfect part. In a former life, "Pigman" was "Supertarget," the first sculpture Brown made after moving to South Florida from New York in 2007.

"I am trying to re-create certain scenes in my head so in a way it becomes almost like playing with dolls," Brown says. "If you reconfigure one sculpture with a new setting or put two characters together or mix up the order, you get something that's a little bit closer to the

**W**earing a long, white gown, a ghostly sculpture titled "Victoria" stands in a room at Florida Atlantic University's John D. MacArthur Campus Library. Her long hair stretches onto a wall beside her, attaching to telephone wires in a landscape that includes a pickup truck, a curving road, an old house and flying birds. On an adjoining wall, a nude woman appears to collapse into the arms of a man, and a dress hangs from a nearby tree. Around the corner stands a nude woman with the head of a deer.

The entire scene is crafted from human and synthetic hair and surrounds even more sculptures, including Victoria's longhaired sister Sara; a curly-haired nude girl with one hand on a fawn and the other holding the blade of a circular saw; and life-size creatures that are part-pig, -wolf and -human. If this all sounds a bit odd, that's because it is.

Called *Clinging Vines Cannot Stand Alone*, the exhibition marks artist Leah Brown's latest installment in a fantastical story she says was relayed to her by two deer in a dream. It was late afternoon. I remember the sun was low in the sky and I was sitting on my resting place, a big, old stump, looking out over the blackberry tangles to the mountains in the distance. You used to be able to see 180 degrees or more from the top of the mountain before the blackberries took over. And then, all you could see was a tangle of thorns and leaves. Two deer—a buck and a doe—walked out of the underbrush. They walked right up to me, holding eye contact the entire time. They didn't speak. It was all very quiet. Maybe it was only images. You see, I really can't remember how they told me this story.

Later, when Brown was in college, she tried to recall the story, but only could remember the feeling of "having experienced in a short time something epic, longer than the time I will live, with many, many people, places and perspectives."

Brown, who earned her BFA at Rhode Island School of Design, turned to her art for an answer, melding human and animal forms in works that constitute a dream world she's given the name *These Woods*. Here, human-animal hybrids roam, hair grows ridiculously long and kudzu, known as the "vine that ate the South," transforms trees and houses into masses that resemble monsters or castles.

"The buildings that disappear are like symbols of the



"Victoria" lets down her hair; Leah Brown's sculpture is on view at FAU.

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truth."

Kudzu is also a major inspiration for Brown. "Growing up in Western North Carolina, there was a lot of kudzu, and it was always omnipresent," Brown recalls, "these huge, scary-looking shapes that would take over rows of fields or encroach on more urban areas. Everybody cursed it, but I don't think it was until I moved away from the Carolinas that I realized it was particular to that region and thought of it as being really beautiful."

Hair came into play when she was working on a human-caterpillar sculpture titled "Caterbaby." Brown recalls, "I was going to buy a wig and cut that up for its fur. But then, I saw that you could buy weave in every different color and texture imaginable. That really opened up possibilities, and I started to think about the power of hair. I had never had mine cut since I was a baby. I don't know why I feared its loss so much, but it was really a source of comfort to me."

*Clinging Vines Cannot Stand Alone* features nine human-hair-on-mylar paintings from Brown's 16-work series. She used her own hair in the pieces, which are hung in oval frames and include "Isabel and the Alligator," a portrait of a woman whose hair is joined with the tail of an alligator at her feet, and "Knotted," which depicts a woman gazing at an antlered deer, her veiled hair flowing into a knot that attaches to the animal.

Brown says hairworking was popular in the Victorian era. "The way I'm grinding up hair to use as pigment is actually a traditional technique known as sepia painting," she says. "It was generally done much smaller and worn inside of a locket. I wanted to allude to the traditional craft of this process by keeping the oval shape."

Francie Bishop Good, who selected one of Brown's hair-on-mylar paintings for the Art and Culture Center of Hollywood's annual fundraising raffle, considers herself a fan of the artist. "I think Leah's works are beautiful, ethereal and a little bit reminiscent of Kiki Smith," she says. "She's really pushing the boundaries of her work and pushing herself, which is so important for the growth of an artist."

In 2010, Brown collaborated with her husband and 18 Rabbit Gallery co-owner, Peter Symons, on



Into These Woods: Brown's dream world comes to life in *Clinging Vines Cannot Stand Alone*.

## "Working with the hair is like magic."

"Sutherland," an installation that contained sculptures of three longhaired sisters shrouded by a canopy of vines. Of course, Brown is attempting to give these sculptures their own back story.

"I'm having the hardest time getting a hold on what their characters are and how they operate," Brown says. "Working with the hair is like magic, like speaking their language back to them. If I can use this symbolic power of hair to get a grasp on how they use hair to create the magic that happens within the context of their story, I can become part of their team in a way and I can become a narrator, too."

Brown says she recently decided where and when the sisters lived. "They became stranded inside their mountaintop home in Appalachia during the Dust

Bowl of the 1930s," she explains. "A big storm after an extended drought caused terrible flooding to the valley below where about half of the town lived, and even worse erosion to the mountain, taking out the roads for months." *Clinging Vines* depicts a period Brown believes came about 20 years later and includes her old friends "Wolfie" and "Pigman."

By this time, she says, the kudzu was spreading out of control, eventually making its way into her dreams. "The kudzu, as it creeps in my imaginings into the windows and over the beds of the quiescent east of its reclusive inhabitants, drips its essence onto their sleeping heads, endowing them with powers unnatural their native South," Brown notes in her artist statement.

"These are the characters, and These Woods are the setting for my work of the past 10 years—composing a personal mythology of sculpture, painting and installation."

*Clinging Vines Cannot Stand Alone* will be on exhibit through May 13 at Florida Atlantic University, John D. MacArthur Campus Library, 5353 Parkside Drive, in Jupiter. Call 561-799-8530. Brown and Symons will also exhibit at Self-Lit during Fat Village Art Walk, 7-10 p.m. April 30 at 18 Rabbit Gallery, 17 N.W. Fifth St., and the Projects, 621 N.W. First Ave., in Fort Lauderdale. Call 828-279-1481 or visit 18rabbithgallery.com. Contact Colleen Dougher at cdougher@citylinkmagazine.com.