Ordinary Vikings come alive in East Bethel

By Sue Austreng
Staff Writer

A mighty oak a hundred years old, the branches dance, the story comes alive.

This is Ordinary Vikings, a collection of 30 “bog star” sculptures hanging as mobiles, moving in the wind and creating a living forest at the University of Minnesota’s Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve in East Bethel.

Swedish-American artist Jill Marie Johnson spent five years – and an entire Scandinavian lifetime – creating Ordinary Vikings, an exploration of the tribal roots of the Scandinavian Viking culture. “I grow up in Anoka, my grandmother farmed here in East Bethel. And my grandmother made sure I knew I was Swedish,” said Johnson, a 1978 graduate of Anoka High School who currently lives in Minneapolis.

“These are our cultural storytellers,” Johnson said of the Norse tales on which Ordinary Vikings is based. “And this exhibit asks, ‘How will tribal 1000 years after the last Viking are we shown?’” said Johnson, who then asked, “Does this exhibit speak any sort of hidden reaction in you? Any subconsciously memories? Do any of these move you?”

As visitors wandered through the reserve Oct. 16, passing to great Ordinary Vikings suspended from the branches overhead, Johnson said, “These stories formed our culture. This is how Scandinavian people under-studied the world. We need to learn our stories, learn how to be in the world. This is a good starting point,” she said.

Johnson said the figures she created, some contemporary Minnesota Swedish Americans – and a couple of Norwegian Americans – as models, are based on tribal stories from the Bronze and Iron Age, leading to the Viking age.

Johnson said authentic Viking materials for the sculpture pieces, casting, beam construction of Scandinavian American faces and attaching them to found tree branches in the reserve’s oak savanna.

Johnson’s work creating Ordinary Vikings links some aspect of the real person’s life to an aspect of the Nordic cultural archetype from the stories of Scandinavian historical characters, including Odin, Thor, Loki, Freya, Fing and many others.

“The (Ordinary Vikings) project explores how each person’s visible story parallel a Nordic cultural story,” Johnson said.

Johnson spent the past two summers studying in Sweden and in Denmark.

“I was very surprised to see the same type of figures she was making at the Legoland Denmark Historical Park,” she said.

Johnson’s work is recognized in Sweden, she said. She has two exhibits planned in 2012.

Following its October exhibit at Cedar Creek Johnson’s Ordinary Vikings installation will next hang downtown Minneapolis; a place the artist currently calls home.

“Ordinary Vikings come alive in East Bethel,” said Johnson’s brother, Lance Nelson of Blaine, for which his sister created, using contemporary materials and techniques, the sculpture pieces, cast for the exhibit. Nelson, Blaine. The Cedar Creek exhibit is funded by the local person’s name, occupation and city of residence.

In memory of Lance Nelson, the Cedar Creek exhibit is funded by the local person’s name, occupation and city of residence.

Hjalmar Holm Beautiful woman with a bat, guiding automatons; David Johnson, retired educator, Anoka. Odins Eye with informative experience; Fred Johnson, retired educator, Blaine. A mighty oak a hundred years old, the branches dance, the story comes alive. Jill Marie Johnson’s 30 “bog star” sculptures hang as mobiles, moving in the wind and creating a living forest.

Features

Above: Ordinary Viking artist Jill Marie Johnson stands herself as Hel, half flesh, half tree. Ordinary Vikings links some Nordic tales on which Ordinary Vikings explores a Nordic cultural archetype from the stories of Scandinavian historical characters, including Odin, Thor, Loki, Freya, Fing and many others. This is Ordinary Vikings, a collection of 30 “bog star” sculptures hanging as mobiles, moving in the wind and creating a living forest at the University of Minnesota’s Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve in East Bethel.

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Visitors: You can view the exhibit before closing time Oct. 28, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Oct. 29, and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Oct. 30.

For more information contact the Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve at 763-787-3258.