

UW-Madison: Student art exhibit explores Arboretum prairies through comics, stories

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MADISON – Growing up, Liz Anna Kozik didn't think of the restored prairies around her home in Naperville, Illinois, as a special habitat worth noticing – until she moved to Providence, Rhode Island, where she felt their absence within the New England landscape.

She had moved to Providence to study art at the Rhode Island School of Design. Now, having returned to the Midwest as a graduate student in design studies in the School of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Kozik has turned her artistic skills to the prairies she once overlooked. As part of her master of fine arts thesis, Kozik has installed an exhibit telling the story of the first restored prairie in the world, Curtis Prairie at the UW-Madison Arboretum.

Through full-length comics, hand-woven tapestries, and wooden signs over the prairie, “Stories in the Land” explores the history of prairie restoration and the land that became the Arboretum in 1934.

The exhibit is officially open through June 8, but the signs and artwork will likely stay up throughout the summer. The wooden signs use the prairie itself as a backdrop, one that will change continuously during the season. Kozik joined her program, where she works with Marianne Fairbanks, an assistant professor in the School of Human Ecology, in 2014.

The signs resemble roadside markers warning not to pass, inviting visitors to slow down and inspect them. The roadside design is an extension of a previous exhibit Kozik installed at the Arboretum last year, and the signs tell a brief history of Curtis Prairie. The negative space is filled by prairie, which on the day of installation was just starting to green up promisingly in anticipation of warmer days ahead.

Kozik drew the comics throughout the semester as part of her graduate focus on comic art, working with UW-Madison Chazen Family Distinguished Chair in Art and cartoonist Lynda Barry. They are based on research she conducted in the fall on Arboretum history with Bill Cronon, the Frederick Jackson Turner and Vilas Research Professor of History, Geography, and Environmental Studies at UW-Madison.

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