



"S.O.S.": timing trees and celebrating nature

By DOUGLAS BRITT

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On Friday, artists Lisa D'Amour, Katie Pearl and Kurt Mueller will build a simulated forest in the Wortham Theatre lobby at the University of Houston.

You're welcome to watch — and even help, if you like — but be warned: Once the forest, made from seven specially designed “tree kits,” is completed at 5:15 p.m., it will remain standing for only half an hour before it's dismantled and disappears.

Described by D'Amour as a metaphor for the “unceasing cycle of nature that we participate in each day,” the combination installation-performance *How to Build a Forest* is just one element of a three-day extravaganza organized by UH's Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts and the university's Blaffer Gallery.

Called *Systems of Sustainability: Art, Innovation, Action*, the event is part festival, part symposium. *S.O.S.* will bring together local, national and international artists, researchers, activists and scholars for an agenda that includes performances, afternoon field trips, lectures and panel discussions, said Karen Farber, the Mitchell Center's director.

“This is really about the social component of sustainability and the research component of sustainability — all the different definitions of the word, really — not just environmental but social and entrepreneurial and so on,” she said.

Just don't go expecting to see landscape paintings in gilded frames. D'Amour, whose Web site describes her as “a multidisciplinary performance maker,” is a more natural fit for the Mitchell Center's emphasis on collaboration among different art forms — and between the arts and other fields, for that matter.

So is the Center for Land Use Interpretation, a research organization whose Blaffer exhibition *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry* is the culmination of a Mitchell Center residency that included work with art, architecture and creative-writing students and setting up a field station on the site of a former junkyard near a metal scrap yard close to the Houston Ship Channel.

Another participant is Marc Bamuthi Joseph, a spoken-word artist, who will present a work-in-progress showing of *red, black and GREEN: a blues*. The *S.O.S.* Web site describes it as a performance and “national community-based eco-equity project” that combines hip-hop poetry, dance, film, visual art and music to jump-start “a conversation about environmental racism, social ecology and collective responsibility in the climate-change era.”

With three days of activities lined up — preceded by a kickoff party Thursday night with electronic musician and DJ Steve Nalepa and a *Texas Oil* viewing — many attendees will understandably need to take the weekend a la carte.

The \$10 admission fee, which is waived for students, offers unlimited access to all activities, so you can come and go as you please. However, registration is required. And some events have limited space and require reservations. Among those is *Time Has Set the Table for Tea*, in which dancing tour guides from the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange lead viewers through the *Texas Oil* exhibit before everyone sits down for tea, cake and conversation with what’s billed as a mix of “experts, innocents and provocateurs.”

Farber said *The Grand Spectacle*, a Saturday event that doubles as a party and the unveiling of a newly commissioned work, is not to be missed. It will feature fireworks, live performances and a screening of what Matthew Coolidge describes as a mashup of documentary footage of electronic-music composer Jean-Michel Jarre’s 1986 *Rendezvous Houston: A City in Concert*, which commemorated the Houston and Texas sesquicentennials and set what was then a record for the largest outdoor-concert audience.

Coolidge, director of the Center for Land Use Interpretation, said the event’s “deconstruction and reconfiguration” of that celebration will be used to mark a new sesquicentennial — that of the birth of the oil industry.

The Grand Spectacle will be presented at Tony Marron Park, 808 N. York on Buffalo Bayou, on a floating platform created in collaboration with the conceptual architecture group Simparch and jointly commissioned by the Mitchell Center and the Buffalo Bayou Partnership.