

'Station Wagon' explores the riddles of childhood

by Ian Atalla

This month, the Commonwealth Gallery has become a playground of an almost otherworldly sort.

Blob-like cushions sprout tentacles on the floor next to a shelf full of cookie jars and licorice. Black-and-white cartoon eyes stare out from concrete walls.

The array of simple forms is by a group of artists from Chicago and Milwaukee. The puzzling riddles of childhood — and the often ambiguous memories that stay and shape us long after we've supposedly left it behind — are the theme of their work.

"I focus a lot on childhood because for me, the only way you can understand any other person's point of view is to look at your own — and the only way to do that is to look at the past which formed you," said Mandy Morrison, a member of the Madison-based Fieldwork art collective. Morrison painted the eyes on the wall.

"They're very much in line with what I look at," she said. "The whole Western culture of Disney and cartoons which influenced all of us in our early years."

The tentacled cushions were the creations of Sarah Whipple. She and Morrison had both come from Chicago to participate in the exhibit, called "Station Wagon."

"They're dull, lethargic," Whipple said of her cushions. "They're out of control — they're one's worst nightmare."

Nearby lay "Pee Puddle" and "Splats." These spiderlike globs almost seemed as if they were creeping across the floor.

Whipple said she found herself constantly caught up in her work by the "base emotions" of childhood we learn to bury as we mature.

"I have to admit a lot of this comes from my own discomfort and anxieties," Whipple explained. "Pee Puddle" is about shame, and "Splats" is about aggression and energy."

Nicholas Frank had taken old family photographs of his



Gallery visitors are invited to make lovely POGs out of pictures of children.

youth and cut them into bits and pieces. Tiny pinwheel collages he made from them line the back hallway of the exhibit.

"There are always all these photos our families take when we're kids," said Frank, a Milwaukee artist. "And we hold

"Photographs have a lot of weird little ironies in them," Frank said. "And I think that childhood also fits in with that."

Other artists in the exhibit include A.E. Theobald of Chicago and "Car," a husband-and-wife team from Milwaukee who have drawn reviews from the *Chicago Tribune*. The exhibit is sponsored by Fieldwork and runs through the end of October at Commonwealth Gallery, located on the third floor of the Madison Enterprise Center, 100 S. Baldwin St.

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on to them and use them as doors to the past."

"But when you go back and look at them, it's difficult to connect yourself with the person you see there."