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## An artist's film takes satiric look at KC and its creative core

By ALICE THORSON

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Human nature is Judith Levy's muse.

As an artist, she has found endless inspiration in the lies we tell ourselves and others, the histories we invent, the facades we hide behind, and the feelings we disguise.

Since joining the Kansas City art community four and a half years ago, Levy has won wide respect and admiration for her exploration of these themes in impeccably crafted works blending humor and social commentary.



KEITH MYERS

A free showing May 9 at the Lawrence Arts Center with feature "NV in KC: A story about artists and envy in Kansas City." Creator Judith Levy demonstrated the inspiration for the movie poster.

Beginning with her 2010 window installation “Panoramic Postcards” at City Center Square downtown, Levy’s output has been prodigious, the result, perhaps, of pent-up ideas unloosed since she turned to making art full time seven years ago.

Before that she made art on the weekends while raising a family and working in the mental health field.

To date, Levy’s best-known work is “The Last Descendants,” a series of fictional videos exploring the family histories of the Lone Ranger, Hansel and Gretel, and Huckleberry Finn.

Kate Hackman, co-director of the Charlotte Street Foundation, was so impressed by the work when she saw it in Levy’s studio that she immediately offered her a show.

Like the postcards, the videos were “engaging this mix of research and humor,” Hackman said, and “blurring fact and fiction while confronting issues of race and sexuality and family dynamics.”



In one of the opening scenes, Lee J. has a big fight with her friend Tanisha, played by Jaimie Warren.

“I thought it was really smart work that was getting in a lot of things that were relevant,” she added, “and using things that were familiar to confront

some pretty complicated issues.”

Next weekend, Levy will unveil a new 50-minute film.

“NV in KC,” is a poignant and hilarious send-up of a fictional conceptual art project that involves ranking Kansas City artists and institutions.

“This is a story about a woman who has a conceptual art project that isn’t very good,” Levy said during a recent studio visit. Funded by an Andy Warhol Foundation Rocket grant and featuring a talented cast of local actors and artists — including Levy herself playing the lead character, artist Lee J. Ross — “NV in KC” is provocative on a number of levels.

The film opens in Lee J.’s studio, where a large chart ranking the city’s visual artists in order of importance (the names are fictionalized), hangs on the wall.

The preposterous chart immediately provokes a scene of high drama when Ross’ best friend, Tanisha, played by artist and photographer Jaimie Warren, sees her name ranked lower than she thinks she deserves. A fight, with harsh words and some pushing and shoving, ensues.

“You’re not making art, you’re making enemies,” cries Tanisha, before stomping out.

If Warren plays the role of hurt and indignant friend with aplomb, it was a stroke of genius to cast De De DeVille, dressed to the nines in smart suit and matching jewelry, as Ross’ therapist.

In the first of several visits (each with costume change by De Ville), Ross sees her therapist after the fight. After offering an baldly untrue account of her own behavior — “I waited calmly” — she reveals that she has started to receive disturbing text messages from her angry friend.

The troublesome chart, which confounds and infuriates all who see it, finds a fitting counterpart in the nasty text messages that take their creepy cues from “The Shining” and “A Stolen Life.”

But they don’t deter her. Hurtful or not, Lee J. is convinced of the righteousness of her mission. “I’m depicting a hierarchy of success because it’s real,” she insists.

Lee J. is insufferable, a needy egomaniac who dominates every gathering and bullies anyone who will listen with the distinction between envy — “wanting something you do not have” — and jealousy — “when you have something and are afraid someone might take it from you.”



Humor and pathos are the glues that hold it all together. And like “the Last Descendants,” “NV in KC” showcases Levy’s impressive flair for dialogue,



narrative and directing.



Levy tapped a range of local talent for her film, including Kansas City actress Erin McGrane, who plays the role of Lee J.'s friend Molly.

Interviews with local arts professionals are interspersed with scenes of Lee J. at home being babied by her partner, Susan (played by Carol Holstead), and quarreling with her artist friends. The professionals play themselves, but their words have been scripted by Levy.

Part of Lee J.'s conceptual art project involves ranking local arts institutions, an effort she shares in an interview with Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art director/CEO Julian Zugazagoitia. It is his task to explain to

her why she should reconsider ranking the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art on the same level with the behemoth Nelson.

"I think there's some tweaking (to be done) here," he tells Lee J. with pleasant restraint.

Interviews with gallery owner Sherry Leedy, Block Artspace director Raechele Smith, art consultant Rachael Blackburn Cozad and Spencer Museum director Saralyn Reece Hardy revolve around questions like "How can an artist deal with the complexity of the art world?" and "Do you think there are art trends?"

Their good faith contrasts with our suspicions of Lee J.: Are the interviews really just a ploy for access?

At some point each of the professionals shares the truism, "envy eats its own heart." They go on to recount personal experiences of envy and ways to make the feeling productive.

And the group has lots of sage advice for envious artists, ranging from "focus inward" to "find the place where you fit in."

The tact and coolness of the professionals contrasts with the aching vulnerability of the artists portrayed.

The drama reaches a crescendo when Lee J. sets out to repair her relationship with Tanisha and makes a surprise discovery about the sender of the nasty texts.

The barrage of criticism, sinister texts and shattered friendships all force Lee J. to re-evaluate her approach. The film ends with her retooled concept for the project, enacted by Shannon Michalski. She plays a ceramics artist excluded from the initial chart.

"Envy is usually a taboo subject and it often causes artists to feel alienated from their peers or experience self-doubt and shame," Levy explains on the Rocket Grants blog. "I'm on a mission to create a project that will help artists allow themselves to accept their own feelings of envy along with all the other feelings they have about living their lives as artists."

That's a tall order, and one "NV in KC" — is unlikely to fill.

What it does deliver is a highly entertaining exploration of human foibles and artistic truths — in the distinctive Levy style.

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