It's a technology take-over in 'Two Trees'

Mike Allen

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With the Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech about to begin its performance and exhibition seasons inside the newly christened Moss Arts Center, it's been a New River Valley-themed week here on the arts beat. But I didn't want a few other on-campus exhibitions to go unnoticed.

The Virginia Tech School of Visual Arts Armory Art Gallery opens the new show "Two Trees" today. It's a dual exhibition by California digital artist Jennifer Steinkamp and New York sculptor Rona Pondick that demonstrates how technology and art mix.

Steinkamp works in digital animation, creating short films that are projected on gallery walls like living paintings. Her contribution, titled "Judy Crook 3," shows a computer-created loop of a tree, waving its branches hypnotically as it goes through all the changes of the seasons in about a minute's time. The works in the "Judy Crook" series are named after a professor of color theory at the Art Center

College of Design in Pasadena, Calif.

Steinkamp's presence in "Two Trees" ties the show to the art exhibitions opening Monday at the Center for the Arts. Her digital animation "Madame Curie" will fill the center's downstairs gallery.

At first glance, Pondick's "Two Trees" contribution, "Dwarfed White Jack," appears to be the more traditional of the two pieces. It is a painted bronze sculpture of a small tree. A closer look, though, reveals that the buds at the ends of the tree's branches are tiny human heads — miniature portraits of the artist. Pondick combines traditional and state-of-the-art methods, using computer design software and 3-D printing technology to create the molds used to cast her sculptures.

School of Visual Arts director Kevin Concannon said he got the idea for the show after consulting Pondick in 2012 about what state-of-the-art sculpture techniques a potential faculty hire should know. He visited her studio, where she walked him through the computer modeling and the 3-D printing methods she uses.

A 3-D printer works in principle like a basic computer printer, except instead of laying down toner on paper, it creates three-dimensional objects by building up thin layers of plastic. In the past few years, 3-D printers have garnered considerable attention for their ability to create objects ranging from prosthetic limbs to guns.

Pondick views these methods simply as artists' tools, like clay models or paint brushes. "Rona is somebody who doesn't really see computers as the odd thing," Concannon said.

Steinkamp has expressed similar views about her use of computer animation.

Concannon was enchanted by Pondick's tree sculptures, and began thinking about how one of them would look placed in the same space with one of Steinkamp's tree animations. "They're the things that made Jennifer famous."

The School of Visual Arts is moving toward a stronger emphasis on

the role of new technologies in the creative process, and "Two Trees" demonstrates where that direction can lead, he said.

Pondick will give a talk Monday at 12:15 p.m. in the Armory.

The show will stay on display until Nov. 22. The gallery's hours are Monday through Friday, noon to 4 p.m., and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Admission is free. For more information, call 231-5547 or visit gallery.vt.edu.