

Dogging around

If you are among the many who find those yapping mechanical robot dogs more annoying than amusing, head for the Fugitive Arts Center, where Swiss artist Eliane Rutishauser has incorporated the little beasts into a video installation, "Nächste Generation," that tweaks our notions of what art is and how we talk about it.

Twenty of the toy dogs are suspended by strings in what serves as the foyer of the center, a bare-bones conversion of an old warehouse near Greer Stadium. A flick of a switch brings the toys to life, and their shrill chorus recalls nothing so much as the sound of Hitchcock's menacing flocks in *The Birds*. The incessant chirping follows the visitor into the center's gallery space, where a projector flashes a short video onto one wall. The star of the video is the artist, who shot the footage in the gallery itself. Her co-stars are more robotic pups, which she displays on a table-sized white cube while schooling the viewer on how to select, approach, and place art the feng shui way.

Feng shui, of course, is the Far Eastern philosophy of harmoniously living with the energy of one's surroundings. It is manifested in the art of placement--both of buildings and of everything within them.

Rutishauser riffs on the feng shui possibilities of art, picking up identical robot dogs as if each were a different, precious object and divining its vibes. She also discusses proper placement of art in the home, dragging a pack of the mechanical toys from one corner of the display cube to another and rhapsodizing over the different effects thus achieved. But the best part of the video is when the artist sternly counsels against a "direct" approach to art and demonstrates its perils by disappearing off-screen and steering the camera directly into one toy pup, sending it crashing. Far better, she shows us, is the "curved" approach to art, which she demonstrates by steering the camera on a winding path that ends without impact on another toy dog.

Without question, few works are funnier than this parodic look at ourselves as we look at art.

Fugitive Arts Center is located at 440 Houston St. Hours are 3-6 p.m. Fri.; noon-5 p.m. Sat. For more information, call 256-7067.

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