Wisconsin artists Levi Fisher Ames (1843–1923) and Albert Zahn (1864–1953) carved animals out of wood, creating wondrous worlds that were both imaginary and instructive. Ames learned to whittle while in the Union Army during the Civil War. Above all, he enjoyed carving small animal figures. Over time he amassed a collection of six-hundred real and mythic creatures. Housing his creations in shadow boxes, he took his menagerie on the road as the “L.F. Ames Museum of Art.” The traveling tent show not only offered a peek at the extraordinary, Ames also regaled audiences with both tall and truthful tales about the animals.

Zahn spent his days carving birds and other woodland creatures in the forest surrounding his home in Baileys Harbor. By the early 1930s, hundreds of carvings dotted the house’s façade and yard. The angels, birds, flora, and fauna were a vivid ode to Zahn’s love of nature, and a towering family tree spoke to his dedication to traditional values. Owing to the multitude of winged forms, Zahn’s art environment was named “Birds Park.”

FOLK & FABLE is one of fifteen exhibitions on view throughout 2017 as part of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center’s fiftieth-anniversary series, THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED. Twenty thought leaders were invited to lend their expertise and provide new insight onto the Arts Center’s collection of works created by art-environment builders.
Faythe Levine, an artist, curator, filmmaker, and writer, collaborated with the Arts Center on FOLK & FABLE. Levine’s varied background helped draw out the storytelling aspects of Ames’s and Zahn’s work and led her to commission Norma Jeanne Maloney (TX) and Stacey Rozich (CA) to imagine Ames’s and Zahn’s worlds through their own visual language.

Here, Levine discusses her role in the development of the exhibition and what drew her to the work of Levi Fisher Ames and Albert Zahn.

How were you introduced to the work of Levi Fisher Ames and Albert Zahn?

Before moving to rural Middle Tennessee, I lived in Milwaukee for over ten years. Wisconsin kept me entertained under a heavy spell of exploration. I discovered the Wandering Wisconsin map published by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center early on. The map fueled my addiction to seeking out art environments and roadside attractions. I frequently made the drive to visit the Arts Center for inspiration. It was on one of the early trips I vividly remember seeing the Levi Fisher Ames collection for the first time.

Already semi-obsessed with traveling sideshow culture, self-taught artists, and miniatures, I was instantly mesmerized with his work, the collection as a whole, and the story it told. His painstakingly crafted wooden figurines based both in reality and fantasy were fascinating. Then, a few months later, I had created.

The initial impact of Zahn’s work was slightly less memorable, perhaps because my interests were too interlaced with Ames at the time. I believe I first saw Zahn’s work at the same time. However, it wasn’t until I had created.

How does your own background inform your response to Ames’s and Zahn’s work?

I was lost, it was all there, merely arranged in a different order.”

In addition to commissioning work from Maloney and Rozich, I decided to include a small selection of my personal photographs of art environments. I have always sought out spaces and artwork that speak to me from a certain place of obsession. This obsession has influenced my personal art practice over the years, with the one constant medium being photographs. Those images comprise my visual journal of places I have stumbled across, artwork I have seen, and spaces I have passed through. With the five images I have chosen to share in this show, I hope to show that there are still places to discover and seek out.

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How has working on this exhibition changed or expanded your notions about what you do?

Working on this exhibition has reminded me to be inspired by obsession, discovery, and self-motivation. The particular feeling of walking up to a new art environment or seeing a new artist that you are drawn to is difficult for me to explain. It’s visceral, tingly, and unlike anything else.

Recently I was re-reading one of my favorite books, Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino. This quote speaks to my relationship with the Arts Center, this opportunity, and most things I am drawn to.

“They grabbed everything that could be taken from where it was and put it in another place to serve a different use... Almost nothing was lost; it was all there, merely arranged in a different order.”

——Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities