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Artist captures awe of light in lamp-filled exhibit

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By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin

So much about Colby Bird's installation of quirky, handmade lamps is immediately endearing, rather unashamedly earnest and a bit breathtaking in a very literal sense.

For starters, there's the scale: Each sizes up to be within the range of an ordinary table-top house lamp, which makes them seem terribly familiar.

However these lamps are hardly the stuff of the average home furnishing store. Shaped from lumber scraps, pieces of worn, old furniture and even old bricks or stones, the lamps are then crowned with an assortment of bulbs. This is the stuff harvested from garage sales or second-hand stores or even culled from the streets.

Bird doesn't refine his assemblages in any way. Their graceful and intelligent composition remains more a thing of unconscious making and task-oriented creativity.

One lamp of snaking block wood flickers with a flame-shaped bulb. Another sports a globe-shaped bulb sprouting out of a hunk of concrete. Still another one looks like half of a Hanukkah menorah.

Many of the lamps demand to be anthropomorphized, their appendages and often sinuous shapes seemingly ready to get up and walk away or perhaps gesture at you.

Bird has 28 of his lamps installed at Lora Reynold Gallery, on exhibit in the gallery's project room through March 16. That's just a portion of the 100 the artist presented at Texas State University Gallery last fall.

As he did at Texas State, Bird affixes his lamps in neat rows on unfinished pine wood beams that are fashioned into long, narrow tables of a sort, each "table" just one beam wide.

And the electrical cords are deftly hidden, giving the impression that the lights are magically lit.

Unfortunately the small project room at Lora Reynolds Gallery isn't as closed off as the voluminous windowless large gallery at Texas State, but you still get something of the stunning effect of a room lit entirely by smaller individual bulbs like a church filled with votive candles.

(If the version of Bird's installation at Texas State was like a cathedral, the current version is chapel-like.)

This is Bird's third solo show at Lora Reynolds. A native of Austin, he lives in Brooklyn and photography is often his primary medium.

And what is photography if not the art of light or of capturing light?

No surprise that light is the real celebration and subject of Bird's lamps. And there's an honest reverence for and appreciation of light that these quirky lamps celebrate with their handmade-and-heartfelt style.

Light inspires awe in Bird. And he's not afraid to pay homage to it.