



Monster is one of Matt and Ben McAvene's puppet creations from their *Shadowland Explorer* project.

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MONSTER MASH: The latest *Art Is Vital* exhibit at Elizabeth Gordon Gallery (15 W. Gutierrez St.) isn't your average art display. It's more like a party waiting to happen—a group of vivid, colorful characters lifted from a child's imagination and poised for action. Father-son team Matt and Ben McAvene are the creators of *Shadowland Explorer*, a fantasy starring the hero "Joh Avridge" and a cast of monsters, jellyfish, and robots. In this show, they appear as puppets, each occupying a star-studded niche on the wall.

Matt McAvene is best known around town for his musical offerings, but he's a versatile and prolific artist in a range of mediums, including puppet making in the tradition of Jim Henson. His creations rival Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy in their googly-eyed splendor, but take things further into the territory of the surreal. Monster is a shaggy, purple-blue creature with five eyes, eight feet, and one snaggletooth, while Cold Gold is a goldfish gussied up in a pimpin' suit and decked out with bling.

Part of the fun of this show comes from the narratives that accompany each puppet. Joh himself, a speckled lizard wearing a grass skirt and a mystical amulet, comes from a tribe of people

who have lost their imagination. His abundant creativity makes him a misfit; the tribe has diagnosed him with an “overactive imagination.” Then there’s Beeps, the R2-D2-shaped robot whose special powers are “communication and gadgetry.” Cold Gold, of course, excels in social networking. These characters are part of an epic story involving Joh’s quest to save his planet from an evil supercomputer—maybe that saga will become clearer at school assemblies, where the characters will come to life.

Easily as fun as the puppets themselves are the videos chronicling their creation. Search YouTube for “Finding Picasso,” and you’ll discover a series of short films starring Matt and Ben on a quest to free their creative spirits. The puppets are up through July 13. To learn more about the project, visit mackyworld.com.