This Lighthouse is Looking for Love Web. October 14, 2026
Ally Fouts for Newcity

Ari Norris' woodmaking expertise is on display at Real Tinsel in Milwaukee with a cheeky energy pairing mirth and art.

Piled erasers, reams of blue tape, tape measures and other studio matter are positioned in various sculptures around Real Tinsel gallery in Ari Norris' exhibition, "Really Really." A cleverness blankets the room as each sculpture is composed of recognizable objects completely made with wood and paint. Recognition provides a warm welcome that invites the viewer to step closer, while formal prowess slows down the necessary time spent with each work as delicate wood grains and artifacts of construction present themselves.

"The Painter (You Don't Know How Deep I Go, or How Down I Get!)" (2026) is grounded by a mahogany podium; two paintbrushes stand upon it with bent bristles like sturdy ankles, the form's left leg slightly externally rotated in a natural lean. A double-sided paintbrush spines the figure, one bunch of bristles being the pelvis and the other being the head. Two more paintbrushes jut out at the shoulders like arms, one extended and holding a cone-shaped paint brush, the other bent and resting on the hip. The figure is peppered with white paint as if its paintbrush limbs had been lying around Norris' studio for years, collecting residual markings of overuse. The subtle bends in the hands and feet of the figure and the sense of ease in its stature animate it with enough personality that it doesn't register odd that it's holding a paintbrush. With the entire piece being made of wood and paint, these crucial subtleties in gesture alone establish an energetic separation between the paintbrush as limb and the paintbrush as object.

Norris' mastery lies in his ability to infuse his sculptures with liveliness by simple, droll means, leading to works that radiate distinct charismas. In "Smoking Brush" (2026), a paintbrush hangs alone on the wall wrapped in the familiar white splattered paint. The brush changes from a displayed object to a portrait by the addition of a cigarette positioned at the imagined face's mouth. In "Sunbather on Sandpaper II" (2026), a figure assembled by erasers lounges on its back with one leg propped up and its arm supporting its head, the full body resting atop a sandpaper disk. Where the erasers meet becomes the joints, the figure's relaxation as palpable as a loud sigh.

Dominating the room is a tall, red-and-white striped lighthouse with arms holding a monocular up to its glowing yellow face titled, "Lighthouse Looking for a Lover (Proposed Intervention for a Decommissioned Lighthouse)" (2026). The lighthouse, which usually serves the singular purpose of being seen from afar, flips the lens in its own searching effort. A hole ingeniously placed at crotch level allows viewers to peer inside and see a system of staircases and structures, the sliver of a complicated inner world on display. This sculpture is spirited and anchoring, suspiciously alive but devastatingly uninterested in the viewer, busied by its own mission.

“Really Really” breathes life into the inanimate while proudly demonstrating Norris’ woodworking virtuoso. Each sculpture demands an ambitious amount of time and presence from the viewer, and in return generously rewards them with a well-earned wink and a wiggle.

“Ari Norris: Really Really” at Real Tinsel, 1013-1015 West Historic Mitchell Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, through October 25.