

ART REVIEW

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## All over the map

### The art is wild and wide-ranging, but it all comes together in the DeCordova Biennial

By Sebastian Smees, Globe Staff | January 29, 2010

LINCOLN - Its virtues are many, but perhaps the best thing about the inaugural DeCordova Biennial is that it forces a response. There's nothing clinical or antiseptic about this show: It's an *experience*. It's brainy and cool in parts, messy and mashed-up in others. It has moments of beauty that are exquisitely austere and others that have a drenching, irresistible quality, like perfect pop. There are moments of confrontation, too - including one installation, by an artist in his 80s, that dares you not to flee.

This is exactly what was required. In previous incarnations, the DeCordova Sculpture Park + Museum's survey of contemporary New England art was a yearly event that many felt had become routine, insular, and safe.

But of course, surveys of contemporary art should be none of the above. They must allow for the exercise of conviction on the part of everyone involved, from the director of the museum on down. That means risking failure. It means welcoming advice from clever people, but ultimately putting the exhibition in the hands of one responsible person. And it means, more than anything, putting on a *show* - not an earnest love-in, trip-wired with good intentions.

With Dina Deitsch, the museum's assistant curator of contemporary art, at the helm, the DeCordova has come through on all these fronts. Yes, there's the odd work in the show that you walk by with little more than a shrug. But by activating the entire gallery, from the welcome desk (where we're greeted by three ravishing circular wall drawings called "Portal" by August Ventimiglia) to a roof terrace (whose windows have been obscured by Liz Nofziger's colored vinyl) and every nook and cranny in between, the organizers have made discovering the work in this show an adventure.

Behind Ventimiglia's elegant wall drawings, for instance, there's a short, sinister corridor at the end of which is a dark room. It's screening a disturbing video by Maine-based artist William Pope.L. A bunch of chickens and goats in an old textile factory nibble at a model of the Capitol made from plaster, eggs, chicken feed, and fat. Eventually, under the pressure of their greedy attentions, the structure collapses.

Like Pope.L's "Corbu Pops" show at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts last year, the piece is messy with ideas. But in this case, the jumpy footage and the hectoring noise of the birds, like the incessant blabbing of political commentary on television, gradually drowns out the possibility of thought. We walk away not so much prompted to reflection as mentally unhinged.

At the top of the stairs, in one of the DeCordova's threshold spaces, another artist from Maine, Randy Regier, has installed one of the coolest, most eye-catching flying machines never to have existed. In bold green with orange trimmings, Regier's "Fisher Fire Fly" looks like the kind of space-race-era exhibit you might stumble upon in a museum of science.

It comes accompanied by a mannequin in a matching space suit, a navigation unit, a desktop model of the spacecraft, and various news clippings. The installation as a whole is called "Honorable Mention: H. Maxwell Fisher and the Space Race," and guess what? Regier has invented the entire thing.

The spacecraft has been constructed out of abandoned farm machinery from Kansas, with the addition of helpful items like those plastic hair-drying bubbles from women's hair salons. Regier's work is part of a wider obsession among contemporary artists with questioning the authority and truth-telling capabilities of museums. That's a tedious theme, but Regier brings it to life with such verve and good humor, it's impossible not to be seduced.

The youngest artist in the show is New Haven's Philip Lique, born in 1983. The oldest artist, Otto Piene, was born in Germany in 1928. That's quite an age gap, and it's in line with a positive new trend in surveys of contemporary art: sprinkling esteemed older artists in among the fresher faces.

Lique's sculptures and collages, made from various found materials, betray the influence of Robert Rauschenberg's combines and transfers. They're sprightly without being quite yet their own thing. For a work called "Shark: American Dream," he has suspended from the ceiling a shark made from house building materials. It's supposed to be a

commentary on - wait for it - "predatory lending practices." (Embarrassed silence.)

Meanwhile, Piene, who was director of MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies for 20 years, has a piece here called "Fleurs du Mal" (after Charles Baudelaire's book of poems, "The Flowers of Evil"). It's a black, inflatable sculpture in the shape of two spiky flowers, displayed in a dark room dramatically illuminated by two strobe lights flashing at different speeds. A motor inflates the tips of the flowers, making a tremendous din, before it turns off, they deflate, and the process repeats.

I didn't know what to make of it, but it sure was scary. I could see it fitting in nicely in the lobby of a late-night S&M club.

Speaking of the old guard, the eye-catching work of Paul Laffoley, born in 1940, also impressed me. The Boston-based artist paints mandala-like works that draw on Jewish mysticism, scientific classifications, and other systems of esoteric knowledge. "Maps of mystical revelation," they're called in the museum's handy blue guidebook, or "blueprints" for raising consciousness." They're hard to parse, but they're in a visual register unlike anything else in the show.

They're next to more works by the marvelous Ventimiglia: videos, sculptures, and minimal drawings made using the same snap-line chalk method (a favorite of carpenters and handymen) he used downstairs for "Portal."

If much of the show expresses the frenetic, overflowing intensity of contemporary life, Ventimiglia's work acts as an antidote. Inspired by minimalist and process art of the '70s, he strips art-making back to the essentials, treating it almost as a philosophical proposition. Not a heavy proposition, mind you: an incredibly light and elegant one.

One work, titled "Practice," is a video played on a tiny screen set into a wall. It consists of nothing but the artist's lips, in close-up and black-and-white, repeatedly intoning the word "practice."

The other video shows a car tire revolving. We see the tire's tread lines moving horizontally across the screen. The rotating tire occasionally slows to a standstill. Its variations in speed are hypnotic, like the syncopated, ragged collapse of waves on a beach. Several pebbles are caught in the tread, and at one point, one of them falls out - an exquisite touch typical of this subtle artist.

By far the funniest work in the show is by Ward Shelley. In the DeCordova's library, Shelley has installed a huge stack of archive boxes, each with its own label: "Pros and Cons," "Negative Effects of Gentrification," "Single Socks and Gloves," "Persuasive Tears Cried by Big Men," and so on. There are hundreds.

His fastidiously drawn flow charts examining cultural phenomena - for example, "Who Invented the Avant-Garde," "Andy Warhol-Chelsea Girls, ver. 1," and "Jack Smith Chart, ver. 1" - are more laborious but, given time, just as funny. (Shelley makes a habit of sleeping in the galleries he shows in, for a few nights at least, and indeed he has a nice little cavern set up with sleeping bag under the table.)

Smith, an influential underground filmmaker, is a ghost animating other parts of the show, too, including Laurel Sparks's paintings and Xander Marro's intoxicating short film "Born to Never Throw Anything Away." This last, which you watch from the inside of a little fancifully decorated wooden theater, was my favorite work in the show.

Combining animation with footage from Marro's visit to the Vermont home of her uncle, an incurable hoarder, the film combines a tumbling, fast-paced energy (its hectic editing makes an MTV music clip look glacial) and a visual intelligence that is gorgeous in every way. It's less than four minutes long. I could have stayed with it all afternoon.

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