

# Laugh at them

Funny art at the DeCordova

BY LEON NIGROSH

Q: Why did the chicken cross the road? A: To see the show at the DeCordova. Fortunately for all of us, the humor engendered throughout the DeCordova's current exhibition is far more sophisticated and polished - and actually funny.

Sixteen artists/artist teams have taken over just about every nook and cranny available to display their particular brands of humor through elaborate installations, photos, videos, paint, and sculpture. The jocular range from super-subtle to sidesplitting, and runs the full gamut in between.

As "President of American Emergency Safety Co.," Boston artist Jeff Smith, along with an extensive team of associates, presents us with a large installation filled with the tools of their trade. Included in the elaborate display is *Yellow Jacket Mobile Emergency Safety System*, a bright yellow and black striped crash cart laden with warning signs and flashing lights. The nearby red *Utility Wagon*, carries a ladder, safety cones, fire ax, and other assorted pieces of equipment to combat virtually any emergency. In the accompanying video, a totally deadpanned Smith sonorously expounds upon the use of this equipment, along with other safety issues. Looking for all the world like the real thing, it takes time to realize the insidious wit that pervades the entire set up. The final giveaway is the series of *International Safety Signs* that range from the common yellow diamond pedestrian warning to a warning about "slipping flaming pothole electrical and dismemberment."

New York City seamstress and punster Pat Oleszko likes to blow things up -- er -- inflate things. Greeting us at the stairwell entrance is her 10-foot tall *Blowhilda*, a colorful nylon Valkyrie that expands and contracts to the modulated breathing of an electric blower. While her inflating/deflating sculpture *The Domino Effect* may be more political than humorous in its depiction of the fall of Communism, her full-size garment, *Udder Delight*, a wearable contraption of breathing red and white breasts, is delightful and just plain wacky.

Christopher "Lucky" Leone is a partner in Fall River's Partial Research Corporation (motto: "We've got half a mind to help you.") and a prolific painter, sculptor, installation and video artist. For this event he has several large acrylic paintings of his favorite sock monkey, Bobo, including one posed like a Delacroix (1798-1863) *Odalisque*, only this one's titled *Bobolisque*. He also has digitally updated several famous images by Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) including *Boy on a Bike (Greeting)*, but instead of a wave, we get the one-finger salute. In Rockwell's original *Sailor*, the humor is based on an obvious succession of girl's tattooed names being inked out



"SUPER JEFFU MARKET" by Jeffu Warmouth: "I want to excrete media."

and the latest being added. Leone takes this a step further as we notice the latest name to go on the old salt's arm is male. But it's his *Fun with Electricity Series* that really gives pause. His *Microwave...safe!* buzzes with a Dunkin Donuts coffee container slowly revolving on the turntable - with the door still open, and his *Dangerously Frayed Electrical Cord* is plugged into the wall and just laying on the floor. Is this stuff funny or scary?

LA painter Erica Rothenberg's small, mundane paintings of birds, mammals, and sea creatures might seem out of place in this jocular setting, but when paired with the slightly smutty texts that accompany them, well... And the works on paper by Cambridge's Todd McKie may at first look as though they were made by a 5-year old, but it's the titles that bring out the smiles. A rainbow of colorful splotches surrounding a cigar-smoking man with a glass of wine is called *Leroy en Paris* -- and the light bulb of recognition flashes in our head. That's erstwhile Playboy illustrator Leroy Nieman.

For sheer invention and outright laughs, Boston media artist Jeffu Warmouth's *Super Jeffu Market* evokes a growing series of grins, snickers, and chuckles. Andy Warhol (1928-1985) may have copied Brillo boxes, but Warmouth gives us a whole supermarket isle of shelves crammed with cans of "Rolled Eyeballs," "Forked Tongue," "Bruised Ego," and more, running a full 25-feet long. Each can label is made up to look like the real thing, with ingredients, guarantees, net weights, and the appropriate pictures for products like "Shaolin Fist" and "Peeled Toes." This display has proved so popular that a variety of the products are actually for sale in the museum's store. What better way to enjoy the show than to take home a can of art humor for only \$9.99?

Leave some time to watch the short videos. Jeffu Warmouth's *Kung-fu Kitchen* is a hilarious chop-socky battle between an eggplant samurai and an evil cabbage warlord. For total zaniness Teddie Dibble's quickies are tops, especially his *Rules for Kissing* in which he attempts the art of puckering up.

*The DeCordova Museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Call 781-259-8355.*