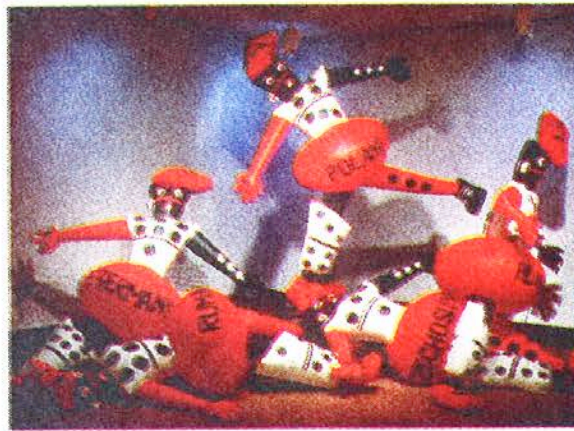


Art Review



"The Domino Effect," by Pat Oleszko, the star of the show at the DeCordova.

'Lighten Up' makes art funny business

By Cate McQuaid
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Most people take art seriously — maybe too seriously. The DeCordova Museum hopes to change that with "Lighten Up: Art With a Sense of Humor," a show that aims for your funny bone. Some of the work chosen by curators Rachel Rosenfield Lafo, Nick Capasso, George Field, and Gillian Nagler is raucous, some of it is pointed, and some of it occasionally falls flat.

Part of the problem is that art, as a rule, is serious, and a museum is a serious place. As Todd McKie, whose paintings appear in "Lighten Up," says in his essay for the show catalog, "context is everything," and trying to mount a laugh riot in the austere white galleries of any museum is a challenge. When you go to a place expecting to be educated and enlightened, it's easy to put your sense of humor on hold in order to try more deeply to understand what you're looking at. That raises the comedy bar to nearly unattainable heights.

Good art and good comedy have one or two things in common. They're both well crafted; a stand-up comedian spends years honing five minutes of material.

Both forms can also be subversive. A good joke often speaks some truth that society generally avoids. Good art crosses the bounds of what's expected to make a point about how the artist, or society, sees the world. Andy Warhol's paintings

of ordinary objects such as soup cans, for instance, imply that such items can be elevated to high art. Yes, that's funny, if we're not thinking too hard about what it all means.

The DeCordova's front facade suggests the visitor may be entering a fun house. A boldly painted cartoon artist by McKie grins from the huge window. Karin Giusti's "Charm Bracelet: Live a Charmed Life," a giant chain strung with a rabbit's foot, dice, a wishbone, and other lucky items, is draped from the roof.

Inside, Pat Oleszko's enormous inflatable characters (such as "Blowhilda," a pugnacious Brunhilda) float over the grand staircase, each not simply filled with air but apparently breathing it, rising and falling with each inhalation and exhalation.

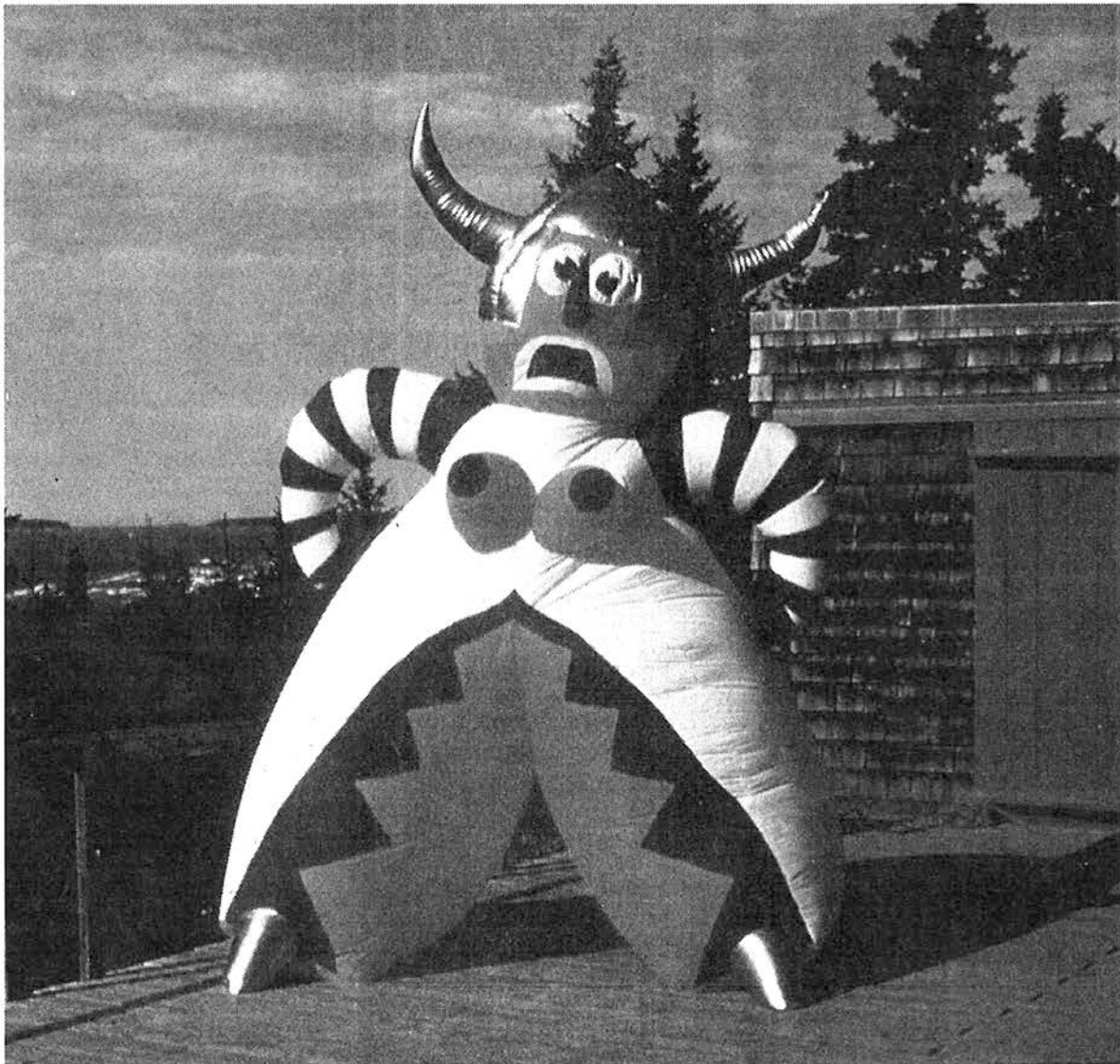
Oleszko, a performance artist who designs parade floats, is the hit of the show. Both the work here and her performances exhibit a madcap absurdist streak that also makes subtle points about gender and sexuality.

Many of the artists take off from popular culture, including (nod to Warhol) mass marketing. Jeffu Warmouth's "Super Jeffu-market" is boxes and supermarket shelves full of cans presumably filled with the artist's own tasty personal byproducts: "canned lungs," "raw nerves," and "drained self-esteem." It's all in the packaging, we're told, and in packaging himself, Warmouth somehow sadly reinvigorates his self-esteem.

Cary Leibowitz, a.k.a. Candyass, fills a wall with pop reflections, turning his persona into cheesy, downtrodden celebrity. There are Candyass lecture passes, and Rolodex cards that say "Failure: 1-800-LOOOZER." Like Rodney Dangerfield, Candyass gets no respect.

Maybe because they're so much like us but lacking in our painful self-awareness, animals are almost always good for a laugh. Erika Rothenberg paints a variety of creatures engaged in intercourse and writes first-person descriptions of the experiences

Art is amusing at the DeCordova Museum



The huge, floating "Blowhilda," by performance artist Pat Oleszko, is filled with air so that she appears to be breathing.

she illustrates.

And Karl Baden's images of the contestants at dog shows are poignant and funny, such as "Dog Dressed as Spider," in which the costume nearly overtakes the beast within it.

Steve Aishman's photos have a "Saturday Night Live" sensibility; his images from the "Lonely Guy" series could be a recurring skit built around that character and all the ways women don't like him. Happily, he met one who did: Heidi Marston, who joins him in creating the "Heidi and Steve" series about their life together. In "Putting the pots your mom gave us to good use," they don bowls and saucepans as helmets and brandish silverware.

William Wegman is an old

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**Lighten Up: Art With
a Sense of Humor**

At: the DeCordova Museum, 51 Sandy Pond Road, Lincoln, through May 28
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standby in the realm of humorous artists. His video "The Hardly Boys in Hardly Gold" is a feat of patience on the part of his Weimaraners (both female, hence the name). The dogs play the popular boy detectives, investigating mysterious goings-on at a summer resort. It's not only comical, it's astonishing what Wegman can do with his animals.

Some pieces are not so much humorous as odd. Philip Knoll's drawings from the "Coelacanth

Series" play on commercial images that appeal to children: They're all cuddly stuffed animals with large eyes. But the eyes are bulging, the flesh rolls like an infant's, and each sits like a diaperless baby with legs spread. The laughs they garner are uncomfortable ones.

"Lighten Up" has good aspirations and provokes a few laughs. The show could have been more successful if the curators had created an installation that felt less like a museum, with its attached stigma of seriousness, and more like a real fun house.

Dressing up the outside of the building and the grand staircase was a start, but like a setup with no real punch line, it falls flat.