

Couple transforms vegetables, food items into crazy artwork

Fitchburg residents to showcase talents at Museum of Fine Arts show in Boston

By Art Simas
SPECIAL SECTIONS EDITOR

Jeff Warmouth and Ellen Wetmore, are definitely not traditional artists.

One delves into comic photography and video images with an alter ego called Jeffu; the other is sculptor of strange looking vegetables that sometimes sprout electrodes and other things.

The husband and wife, both originally from the Michigan at its state university at Ann Arbor, attended Boston's School at the Museum of Fine Arts in the late 1990s and now live in Fitchburg.

On Dec. 2-5, both will exhibit their unique perspectives at the annual MFA sale in Boston at the school's gallery at 230 The Fenway. The event also serves as a big fund-raiser for the school. Sales of all artwork are split evenly between the artist and the MFA, which in turn provides scholarships for new students.

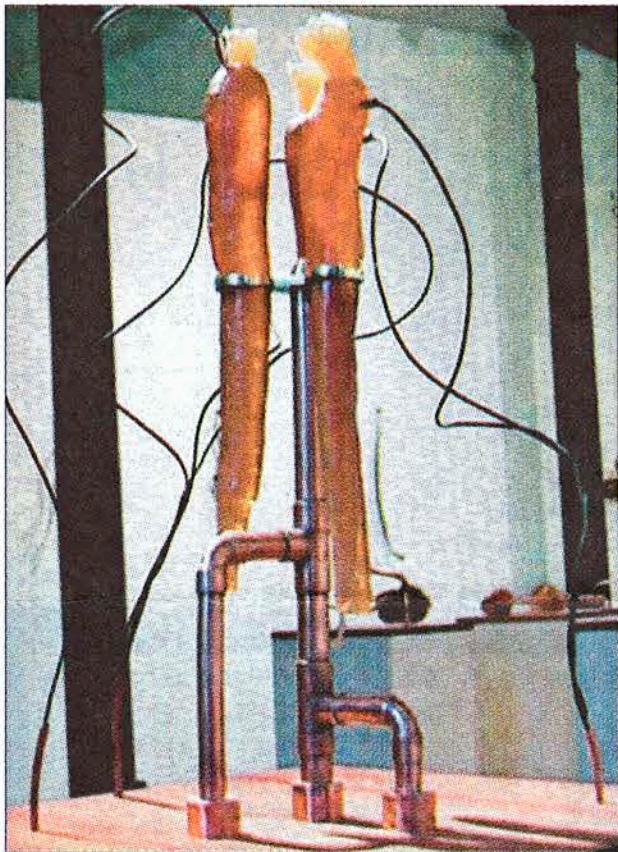


PHOTO COURTESY OF ELLEN WETMORE

Dr. Bell's Experiment," also known as "Frankenstein Carrot" by Ellen Wetmore. The artist admitted she was in a "vegetable phase" when she created the piece.

Mr. Warmouth, 34, said the sale has grown to be very popular because all alumni of the school can display their work there. This year artists are limited to two works.

For his contribution, "I'll be putting in a couple of high end digital prints. One is called Mock Lobster, a photograph of chopped chicken livers in the form of a lobster. That was from a series I did a few years ago called 'Strictly Kosher Style.'"

For his second project, Mr. Warmouth, who teaches interactive Web media in the department of communications at Fitchburg State College, will have a display of canned goods from the series, SuperJeffu Market.

"Jeffu is my artistic alter ego that I use and idea of the canned goods plays off the idea of you are what you eat.

"Today we don't eat stuff directly out of the ground. We go to a supermarket. So I do a twist and a transformation on that. It starts with a self-portrait and splits out to consumer products, with cans labeled as 'macaronied elbow' and 'raisin brain.'

"What happens if I take it so far that I'm eating so many consumer products that I sort of become a product myself? It's social comic commentary but not heavy handed on how our identities are created."

At the show, Mr. Warmouth will sell individual cans (\$10), "so you can take home the artwork in bits and pieces."

Mr. Warmouth said he is working on a monster movie with an all-vegetable cast called "Day of the Cabbage," a short movie shot in high definition video, with live-action vegetables, controlled as puppets.

"This is sort of the third one that I've done with vegetables. The first was Kung-Fu Kitchen, which can be viewed on my Web site at www.jeffu.tv and there are also examples of canned goods on the site.

Mr. Warmouth will also exhibit his works from 6 to 10 p.m. on Dec. 10 and 2 to 10 p.m. on Dec. 11, at A Garden of Purchasable Delights, 100 and 111 Franklin St. in Allston.

Ellen Wetmore, 32, studied traditional sculpture while at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. She moved to New England in 1995 and enrolled in the masters program at MFA two years later.

"Whereas Michigan was very traditional in its approach, MFA threw everything into a melting pot," she said. "Their attitude was, 'You've done sculpture, great! Now, how about doing video?' And that liberated me to add materials.

"I really like to use natural forms in my work. Whenever I'm looking for a design solution I've found there's already something in nature that's perfect, so I study that.

"For example, I was doing metal sculptures of insects, spiders, moths and flies, and I was really fascinated by their joint structure because they are exoskeleton creatures, with their skeleton on the outside of their bodies, and that works really well in metal work and you find there a lot of beautiful designs and solutions."

Besides working with metals and joints, she said she likes to follow 'lines' in nature, such as a vine or the main line in a fern that seems to extend itself.

"The lines in plants and animals led me to plumbing and electricity. There are easy body metaphors between valves and hearts and the neurological system and the nerves and the way the muscles connect in and out of each other. And electricity functions a heck of a lot like our bodies.

"So you can take real electrical form, like the wires that you need for wiring light bulbs in walls and you can base a model on the wires reaching out. Instead of a flower at the end of the wires, you get a speaker system."

One possible project at the MFA sale may portray a 'Frankenstein Carrot' with electrodes attached to it and

MOCK LOBSTER



Chopped chicken livers in the form of a lobster. Enjoy!

PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFF WARMOUTH

"Mock Lobster" by Jeff Warmouth is actually made with chicken livers and is part of a tongue-in-cheek display he made a few years ago called "Strictly Kosher Style."

bolts of electricity, in a very weird science experiment.

She admits, "I'm going through a vegetable phase right now. It started with bell peppers, then it was the carrot phase, now it's an onion phase."

Ellen also joined the Boston Sculptors Group, an artist cooperative that makes connections with galleries and other places where artists can display their work.

"Figuring out how to make a living is really difficult. You can't ask the government for a \$30,000 grant so you can live for a year, like you can in other countries, so these folks in the cooperative gallery are focused on promoting each other and putting their work out before a serious public ... and the profits come back to the people who are here, not to a third-party dealer or broker. So you get to keep more money you make as an artist.

"Working for yourself as an artist is really a risky investment.

When you think about what you pay yourself, it comes out to about 10 cents an hour," she said.

"But this is the first period in my life that I've not been relying on a daily job."