

The Boston Globe

For them, a marriage of art and humor

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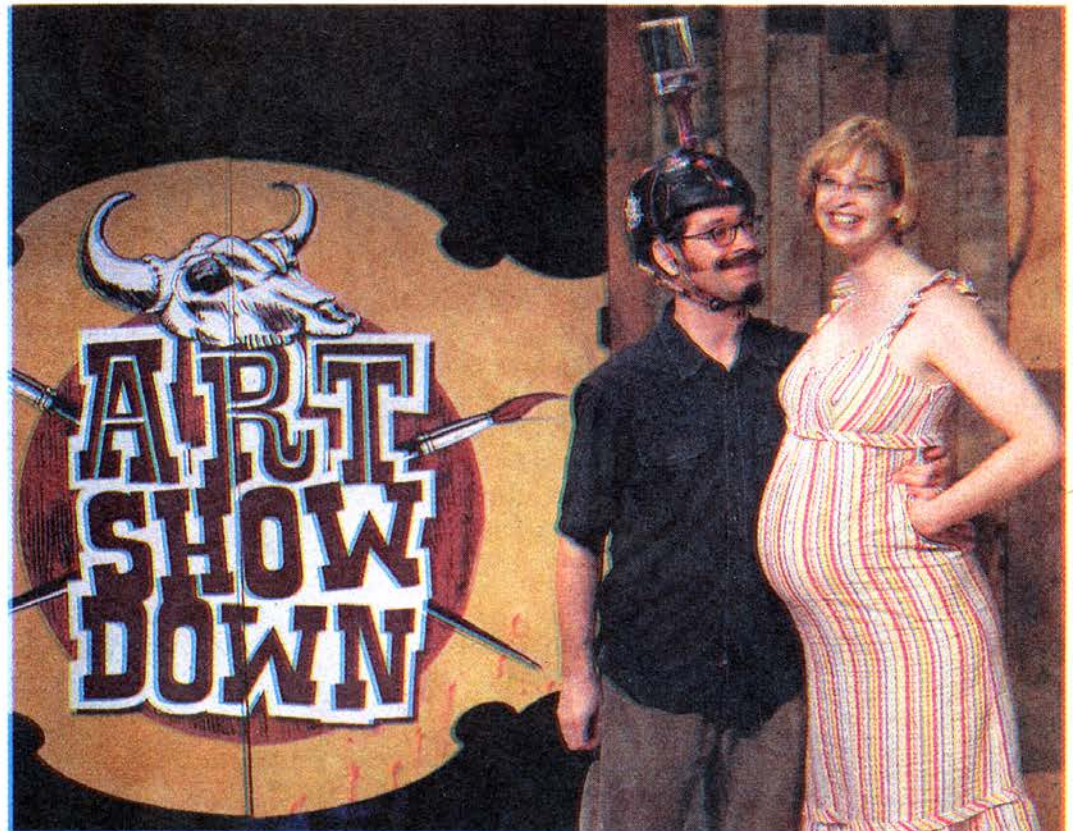
FITCHBURG — Out here on the western frontier of the Boston suburbs is not the first place you'd think to look for artists, the crafters and critics of contemporary culture. But sculptor Ellen Wetmore and multimedia artist Jeff Warmouth make their home here, and down in the basement they make their art. Lately, it's been a busy place.

"I looked at my iCal, and realized that in a four-week period, the two of us had eight shows going on," marvels Warmouth, who teaches at Fitchburg State College.

The couple have come to a momentary stop in their living room, which is packed with plush, deep chairs and a leather sofa.

Warmouth is easygoing and thoughtful, but his mustache — waxed and curled at either end — hints at his showmanship. He's a prankster artist, who looks to the Marx Brothers as inspiration. The summer group show at Green Street Gallery featured Warmouth's film "Day of the Cabbage," a pun-filled B-movie takeoff about a giant cabbage hurtling toward Earth.

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DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Husband and wife Jeff Warmouth and Ellen Wetmore say they built their relationship on respect for each other's art. "Plus," says Warmouth, "she was cute."

Artists mix work, family, media — and a sense of the absurd

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Current exhibits include Wetmore's solo show at the Boston Sculptors Gallery and her two-person show (with Jessica Straus) at Simmons College, and Warmouth's "Art Show Down," a televised art game show and exhibition at Art Interactive that he co-curated with Roland Smart. Several artists have been involved on the project.

"You could say I was the ringmaster," says Warmouth.

In fact, Warmouth and Wetmore's life lately has been a bit like "Hang 'Em High," a challenge in "Art Show Down" in which the contestant carrying a portfolio of work must climb a rock wall, hanging as much art as possible.

Glance over at Wetmore, and you'll see they have their own collaboration in the works: a baby due Oct. 15.

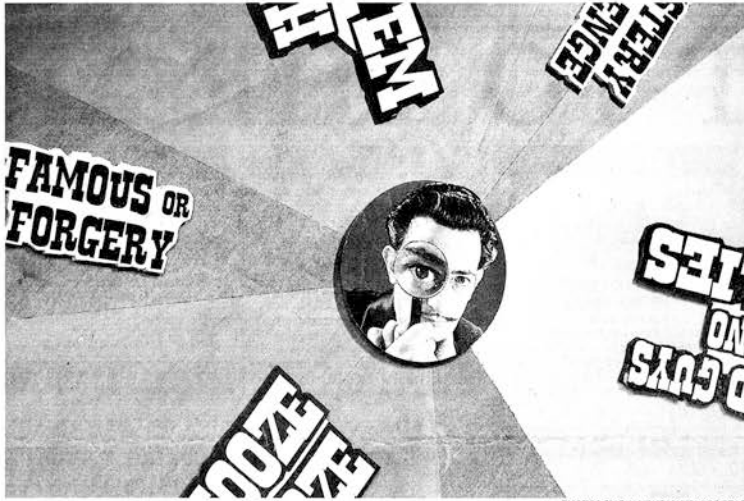
Wetmore, blond and bespectacled, is quieter than her husband, and slyer. Her works at Boston Sculptors comically deflate, poke fun at, and savor pregnancy and other bodily wonders and indignities. For instance, the rubber "Boob Balls" hang like a cluster of grapefruits on white ribbons. The name came before the art.

"I think about bodies and their gross physicality," she says. "How do you lighten that up? With pregnancy, there's this thing that happens . . ." Her hands circle her chest. "Boys love that. The title just came to me. That piece branched into fruit, which you'll see at Simmons."

Her work is both funny and vaguely creepy. "I think of humor as mitigating the atrociousness of everyday life," Wetmore says.

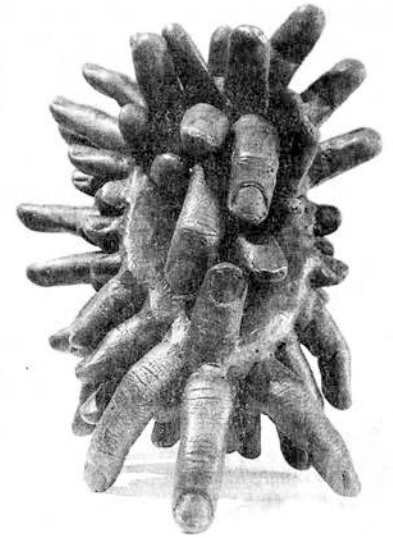
Despite their busy lives, the baby boy's arrival has been carved into the schedule.

"I have nothing in my calendar



PHOTOS BY DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Jeff Warmouth's comic "Art Show Down" includes the "Surreal Wheel" (above), while Ellen Wetmore's wry reflections on physicality include her sculpture "Fingers."



for November and December," Wetmore says.

Warmouth, though, will have his professional hands full after the baby's birth; the final episode of "Art Show Down" tapes later this month. It follows several elimination rounds, and the winner will be deemed the "Ultimate Artist." The exhibition closes Nov. 5.

"Art Show Down" twits the game show form by having local artists compete in a variety of Old West-themed contests designed to gauge the skills needed to succeed in the art world. Like many game shows and some art, it's half serious and half ridiculous. Is your ability to mark up your opponent with a paintbrush mounted on your head, hands tied, really a measure of your artistic ability? No. But it's fun to watch.

Some of the game show's criteria can apply to Wetmore and Warmouth.

1. *Schmooze and Booze:* The contestant must converse intelligently with a curator while attempting to consume wine and cheese.

Warmouth and Wetmore handle the business of art with aplomb; they act as each other's business managers and studio assistants. They remind each other about grant deadlines and prompt each other to mail off marketing materials. Generally, the process runs without a hitch. Lately, with so many shows, it's gotten sticky.

"The left hand was missing," Wetmore says. "Jeff did surfaces on two of my pieces because I couldn't get into the material. Then he applied for the [Massa-

chusetts] Cultural Council sculpture grants, and he got a finalist grant. I applied too."

But Wetmore, the sculptor, didn't win an award.

"I felt bad about that," Warmouth says.

2. *Art or Bull:* Contestants must decide whether a sculpture is an actual artwork or dumpster trash.

Warmouth, 36, met Wetmore, 34, back in 1992, soon after he'd graduated from college in Ann Arbor, Mich. She was still a student. They fell for each other's art before they fell for each other. First, Wetmore viewed Warmouth's photographs in an exhibition and liked what she saw.

Then, "I helped a mutual friend pick up a piece of yours at a gallery," Warmouth tells her. "It was a necklace that had inch-and-a-half

thorns on it. It was gorgeous, beautiful silver.

"I always respected you as an artist," he continues. He smiles. "Plus, she was cute."

3. *Action Art Shooting Gallery:* Using a paint gun, contestants take aim at moving targets, aiming to hit silhouettes of politicians, not other artists. The game suggests these politicians are foes of art.

Not everybody appreciates or understands artists. Warmouth's father, who died earlier this year, worked for a power company. His mother is a retired secretary. Wetmore's dad is an urban planner, her mother teaches finance. Both sets of parents have supported, if not completely understood, what their son or daughter was up to.

"Mom keeps trying to figure out how to make projects that are saleable," Wetmore says, with wry amusement.

"Dad got to see 'Day of the Cabbage,'" Warmouth says. "There's a bonus to doing comedy. It does

have mass appeal. My dad refused to ever set foot in a museum, but even he and my mom got my work. They laughed at the funny bits."

4. *Mystery Challenge:* This contest changes from week to week. Contestants don't know what they're in for.

"Our next project doesn't have a name," Wetmore says, patting her belly. "We call him Passenger X, or The Critter."

The two seem circumspect about the impending, lifelong project ahead. After all, they've been working closely for 14 years, and the several gears of their two careers seem well-oiled and smoothly operating. There are toxic art supplies and chemicals to clean up before the baby goes mobile. But otherwise, they're as ready as they can be. Except for that name. It's not quite as easy as "Boob Balls."

"It's like naming an artwork," says Warmouth. "But more important. For forever."

Now showing, nearly everywhere . . .

JEFF WARMOUTH

Art Show Down

At: Art Interactive, 130 Bishop Allen Drive, Cambridge, through Nov. 5. Show tapings with live audience Oct. 14 and 28. 617-498-0100. www.artinteractive.org.

Intersections: Sculpture and Installation From Distinguished Massachusetts Artists

At: Open Square Gallery, 4 Open Square Way, Holyoke, through Nov. 18. 413-532-5057, ext. 202. www.massculturalcouncil.org/artistnews/Intersections.html

ELLEN WETMORE

Ellen Wetmore: Close to Naked

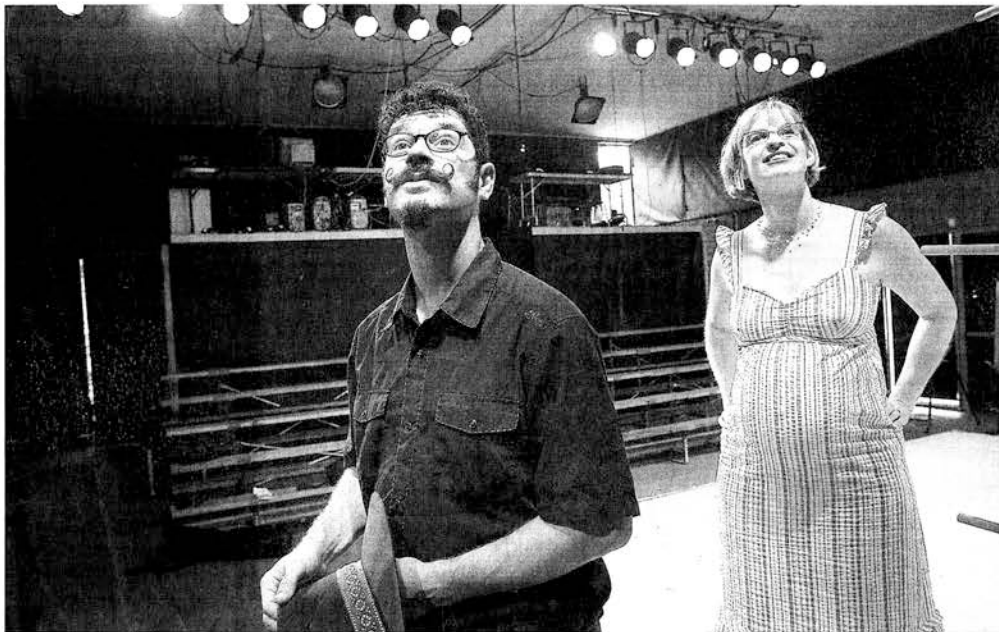
At: Boston Sculptors Gallery, 486 Harrison Ave., through tomorrow. 617-482-7781. www.bostonsculptors.com. Wetmore's work is also in a concurrent show at Boston Sculptors Gallery, "Site-Insight: Boston Sculptors Beyond the Gallery."

"Mixing it Up," with Jessica Straus

At: Trustman Art Gallery, Simmons College, 300 The Fenway, through Nov. 3. 617-521-2268. www.simmons.edu/trustman.

360° in Fitchburg: Contemporary Sculpture From the Boston Sculptors Gallery

At: Fitchburg Art Museum, through Jan. 21. 185 Elm St., Fitchburg. 978-345-4207. www.fitchburgartmuseum.org.



Jeff Warmouth and wife Ellen Wetmore walk the set of "Art Show Down." Wetmore says one of her recent works, now on display at Simmons College, was inspired by the changes her body went through during pregnancy.