

Art

Local color

The 2007 DeCordova Annual Exhibition

BY GREG COOK

'THE 2007 DeCORDOVA ANNUAL EXHIBITION'

DeCORDOVA MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN, 51 SANDY POND ROAD, LINCOLN | THROUGH AUGUST 12

It's an art-world misconception that, to champion local art, you have to grade on a curve. After viewing the ICA's Foster Prize exhibit last winter, the *Boston Globe's* Ken Johnson wrote, "I don't think local favoritism helps anyone very much, excepting the lucky individuals who win the big prize." Enter the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Garden's annual round-up of its Top 10 "best, most interesting, and visually eloquent artists who work in this region," which annually raises the question of whether local artists warrant a show on this scale — besides prompting the inevitable arguments about who's in and who's not.

Organized by DeCordova staff talent scouts Rachel Rosenfield Lafo, Nick Capasso, and Lisa Sutcliffe, the 2007 DeCordova Annual Exhibition has a standout in Jungil Hong of Providence. Affiliated with that city's punky Fort Thunder art gang, she makes eye-popping psychedelic screenprint collages of Hieronymus Bosch-style apocalypses by way of Terry Gilliam's *Monty Python* animations. People dressed in chain-mail armor gather eggs and vegetables and hang leaves to dry in landscapes dotted with windmills, malignant clouds, wolf-headed birds, black armies brandishing boomboxes, a leaf woman, a beehive, and giant gulls and crows. A wavy red pattern filling the ground makes the earth look to have been flooded with fire. Her work seems a mysterious allegory, a dream of scratching out an existence in the shadow of looming environmental collapse.

On the whole, however, the show feels too safe. It could benefit from examples of digital or conceptual art — maybe Paper Rad from Easthampton or Boston's Institute for Infinitely Small Things. And what are Connecticut artist Robert Taplin's lame figurines of Punch, as in the old Punch and Judy puppet shows, doing here?

No need to apologize for Fitchburg artist Jeff "Jeffu" Warmouth, whose 2007 video *Spudnik* mixes animation and puppetry to tell its fractured tale of a Soviet-styled nation of potato people and their quest for the stars. "The desire for space exploration among the Potatoes has a long and delicious history," the narrator explains in that optimistic march-of-progress tone familiar from newsreels and science documentaries. Warmouth's installation includes rocket models and photos "documenting"

the Spudnik program — the "Unmanned Foil Satellite" is a ball of tinfoil with three metal legs that exploded on re-entry because "engineers had neglected to poke holes in the foil to prevent steam build-up." Warmouth's project is a light goof on museum displays, filled with groan-inducing puns and charming *Sesame Street*-style humor. Sometimes it's too light and silly, but he keeps everything short enough that it doesn't wear out its welcome.

Samantha Fields of Avon fills the museum's giant second-story window with frilly layers of white curtains and valances in a mix of lacy, floral, and polka-dot fabrics. The arrangement evokes ladies' petticoats, with all their womanly sexuality. Fields covers the wall opposite with white vinyl siding (think male) punctured with holes and strung with bright-colored yarn in swirling, speckled floral patterns (female). The designs are taken from old wallpaper, but in execution it feels like a giant 1970s girls' Art Nouveau craft set. Cool.

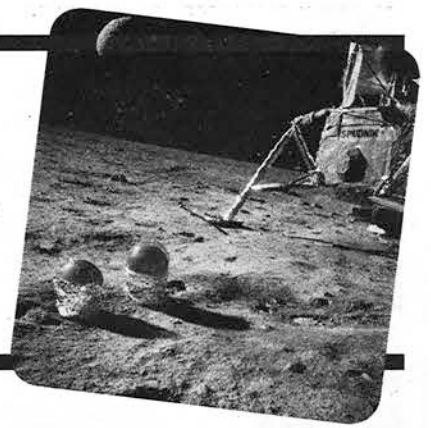
Elke Morris makes sweet color photos of the ramshackle working-class neighborhoods of Lewiston, Maine, where she resides. Like a number of artists these days — Miklos Gaál and Olivo Barbieri are the best-known — she blurs out parts of her scenes so that what's in focus resembles toy models. The effect is odd but alluring.

Nathalie Miebach of Brookline and Ria Brodell of Jamaica Plain show the promise of work that's still in development. Miebach's sculptures resemble the mutant offspring of basketry and Tinkertoys. She tracks tides, moon phases, bird sightings, and weather and turns her data into abstract woven reed sculptures that look like 3-D computer models. The idea is compelling; the sculptures are fussy and unsatisfying. Miebach is fascinated by the patterns that emerge when you map information, but the information itself is frustratingly inscrutable, and it constricts her forms.

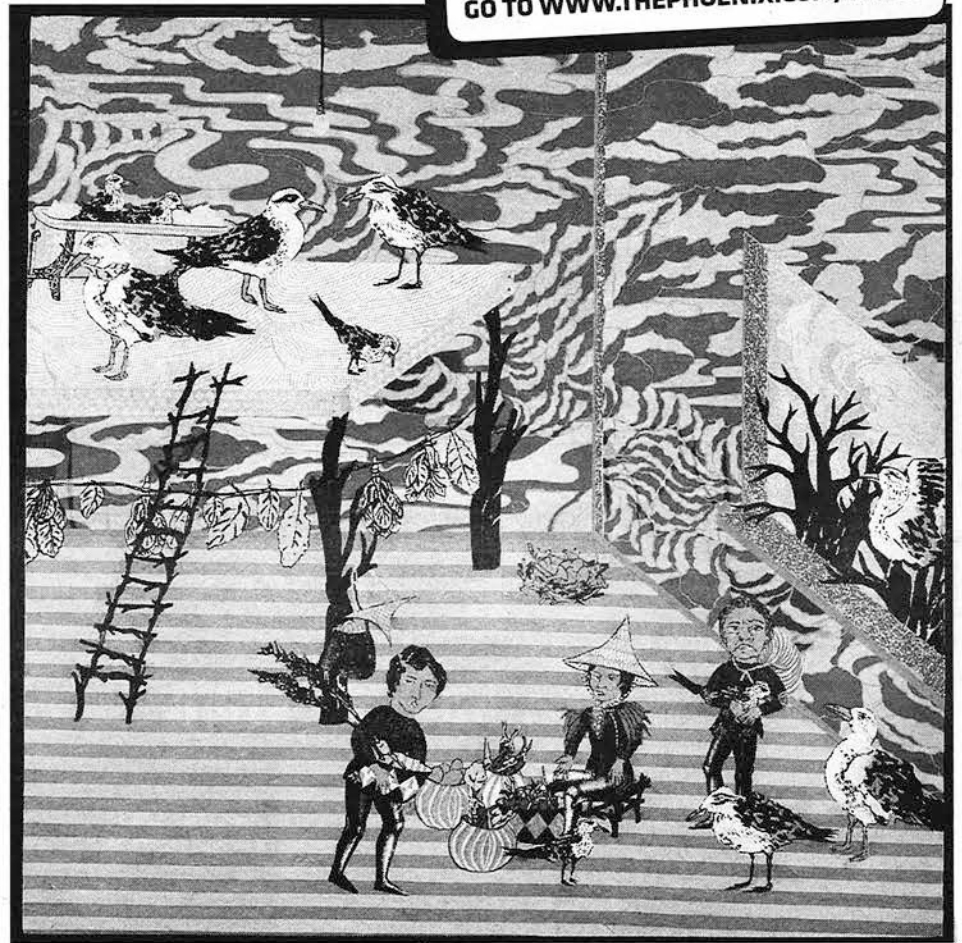
Brodell's cartoony paintings and drawings illustrate an invented fairy-tale world of whales, submarines, Wormbunnies, Birdmen, and Sodmonsters. There's one lovely painting of a whale and a sub tooting along in water filled with bubbles and drips. But many of her scenes seem constrained by her story, a fable about war and our stewardship of the earth. I'd like to see more of the sculptures here — a baby gray Wormbunny curled up with an adult, mud monsters with threatening stalactite teeth and marsh grass hair. Imagine the visceral charge of being surrounded by these things.

DeCordova curators have a predilection for divertingly handsome craft, a predilection that can make the institution seem

SPUDNIK Jeff "Jeffu" Warmouth tells a tale of a Soviet-styled nation of potato people and their quest for the stars.



FOR A SLIDE SHOW OF IMAGES FROM THE DeCORDOVA ANNUAL EXHIBITION, GO TO WWW.THEPHOENIX.COM/ARTS.



TREE TOP TRADING POST Jungil Hong's Hieronymus Bosch-style apocalypses by way of Terry Gilliam are this year's standouts.

square. Sarah Amos of East Fairfield, Vermont, does biomorphic abstract prints filled with wiggly stripes, speckled fish-scale patterns, and chains of dotted lines. Anne Lilly of Allston offers a series of minimalist steel whirligigs resembling engineers' toys for modeling the motion of prairie grass in the wind, theme-park rides, or radar arrays. Sandra Allen of Hingham presents a 37-foot-tall photo-realist pencil drawing of the braided trunk of a palm tree on the tall narrow wall at the bottom of the museum's stairwell. There's formal accomplishment here, but not any intrigue or friction or sense of surprise that would lead you to bigger thoughts, something to chew over once you leave the room.

Regardless of any individual year's shortcomings, the Annual Exhibition is a rare thing among local art institutions and deserving of praise. It's important to bring in art made elsewhere for our edification, entertainment, and inspiration, but a majority of local institutional

exhibits feature out-of-towners. I'd like to see the balance shift a bit toward what's grown locally. Look at the way the Museum of Fine Arts mixes local art into its programming: right now there's Edward Hopper's New England paintings, prints by Michael Mazur of Cambridge, a recently acquired painting by Bostonian Allan Crite, and, in "War and Discontent," Bostonian Suara Welitoff and the late Philip Guston, who taught at Boston University from 1973 to '78.

And the complaint about grading on a curve? A glance at the "Annual Exhibition" alumni refutes that charge — those of the past decade include Laylah Ali, Ambreen Butt, Lalla Essaydi, Steve Hollinger, Joe Johnson, Brian Knep, Laura McPhee, Abelardo Morell, Jane Smaldone, Barbara Takenaga, and Sarah Walker. These are standout local artists; several have growing national reputations. They're proof that local favoritism done well encourages our artists to keep at it, and keep at it here. ©