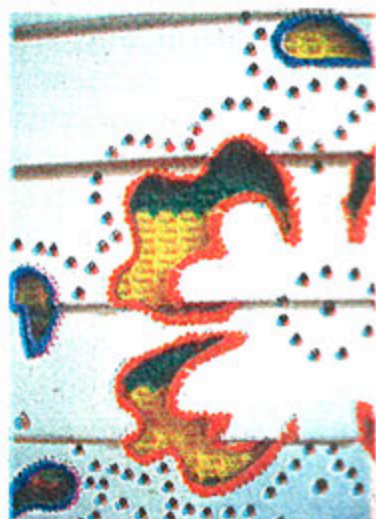




Robert Taplin's sculpture "Punch Stopped at the Border."



COURTESY OF DECORDOVA MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE PARK

The 2007 DeCordova Annual Exhibition includes (from left) Jungil Hong's "Miami Haze," Elke Morris's "Domicile I," and Samantha Fields's "Wallpapered Space II."

# Punch, potato scientists, and 'Sodmonsters' at DeCordova

By Ken Johnson  
GLOBE STAFF

The 10 New England-based artists selected for the 2007 DeCordova Annual are an earnest, well-behaved, hardworking lot — there's not a slacker, a punk, or an ego-maniac among them. Each is respectful of his or her craft, and each does his best to amuse, intrigue, and otherwise please the viewer. No visitor will be

## Art Review

made to feel like the butt of a joke or an ideological punching bag.

Organized by DeCordova curators Rachel Rosenfield Lafo, Nick Capasso, and Lisa Sutcliffe, the exhibition does have its interesting moments, but if you like your art sweet, familiar, well-made, and inoffensive, this is the show for you.

The one artist who does get into some unpredictably peculiar territory is Robert Taplin,

who creates small, comical, semi-realistic narrative sculptures featuring the character Punch, a traditional English clown with a long nose and a conical hat. Made of white cast resin, the sculptures look as if they were carved from marble by an eccentric 18th-century Frenchman, but the dreamlike episodes they describe have a decidedly modern weirdness.

In one, Punch makes love to a  
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# DeCordova Annual plays it safe and sweet

## ► DECORDOVA

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woman in a fancy party dress. In others he appears homeless pushing a shopping cart full of cast-off junk, receives a prize (a small replica of the Statue of Liberty) from a group of men in business suits, and furtively urinates into a large vase. These and other enigmatic vignettes have a delightfully creepy and disquieting psychology.

The prize for the funniest artist definitely should go to Jeff "Jeffu" Warmouth for his sculptures, digital photographs, and video documenting an outer space exploration program called "Spudnik" developed by a race of anthropomorphic potatoes. The deadpan video describing how potato scientists learned to harness intestinal gases as a means to propel "potatonauts" on rockets to other plan-

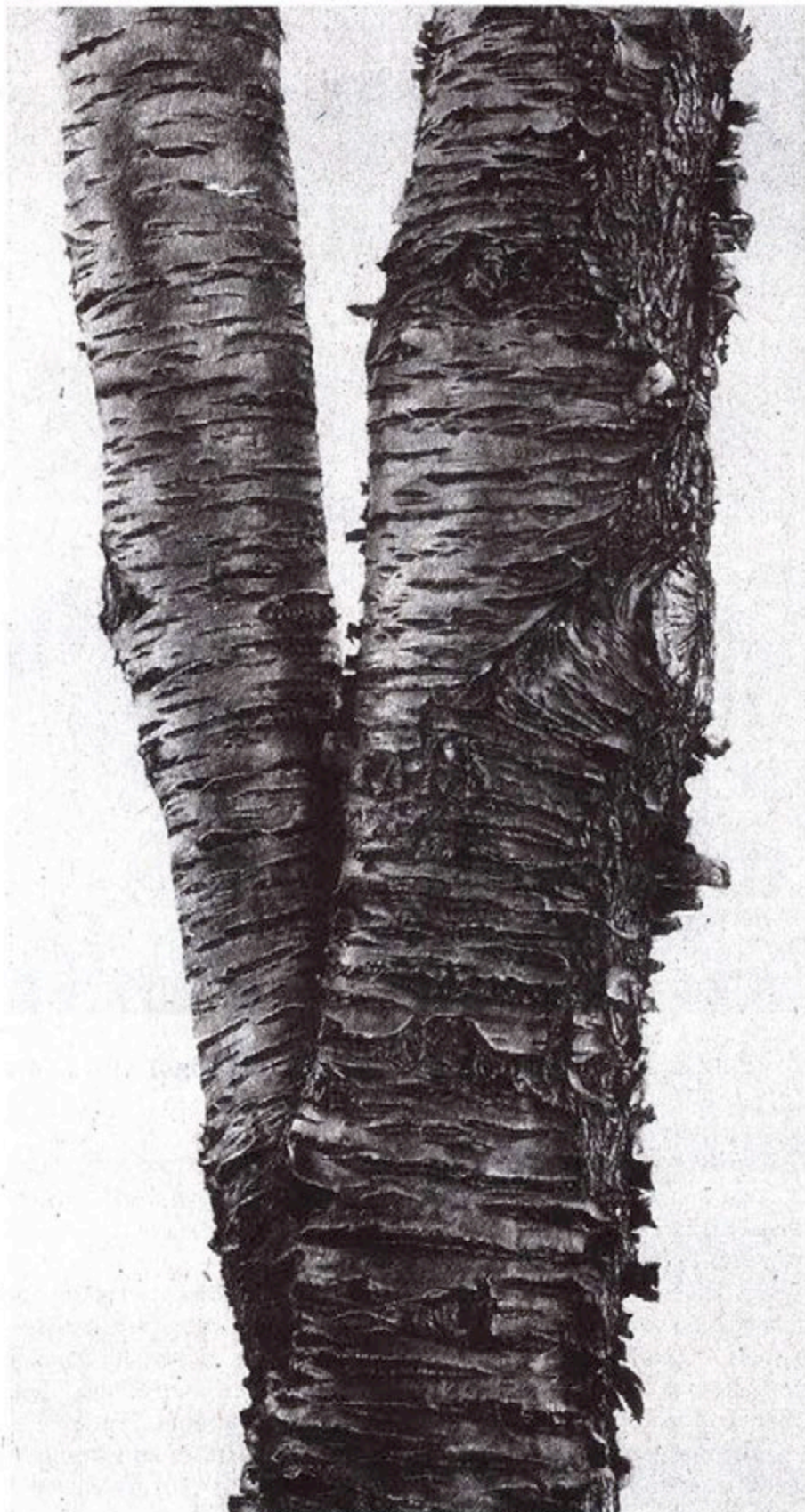
## ANNUAL ADVENTURE

Check out a photo gallery of works at the DeCordova at [boston.com/ae/theater\\_arts](http://boston.com/ae/theater_arts)

ets is hilarious, and models of vehicles for extraterrestrial travel made from pots, pans, utensils, aluminum foil, and other kinds of kitchenware are quite clever. Warmouth would have to push his ideas to greater extremes to achieve artistic profundity, but what he has done so far is undeniably entertaining.

Also promising are the complicated, large-scale, organically shaped baskets woven by Nathalie Miebach. The baskets have numerous curious elements added on: configurations of colored dowels, wooden balls, spools of string, numbered lengths of tape or pipe, and other hard-to-identify doodads.

Wall labels explain that Miebach's baskets are actually three-dimensional representations of meteorological information, much of which she records and gathers herself. The idea of converting abstract data into visually compelling forms is fine; making it legible and meaningful for viewers who don't know the artist's codes is the challenge. As they appear now,



COURTESY OF DECORDOVA MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE PARK

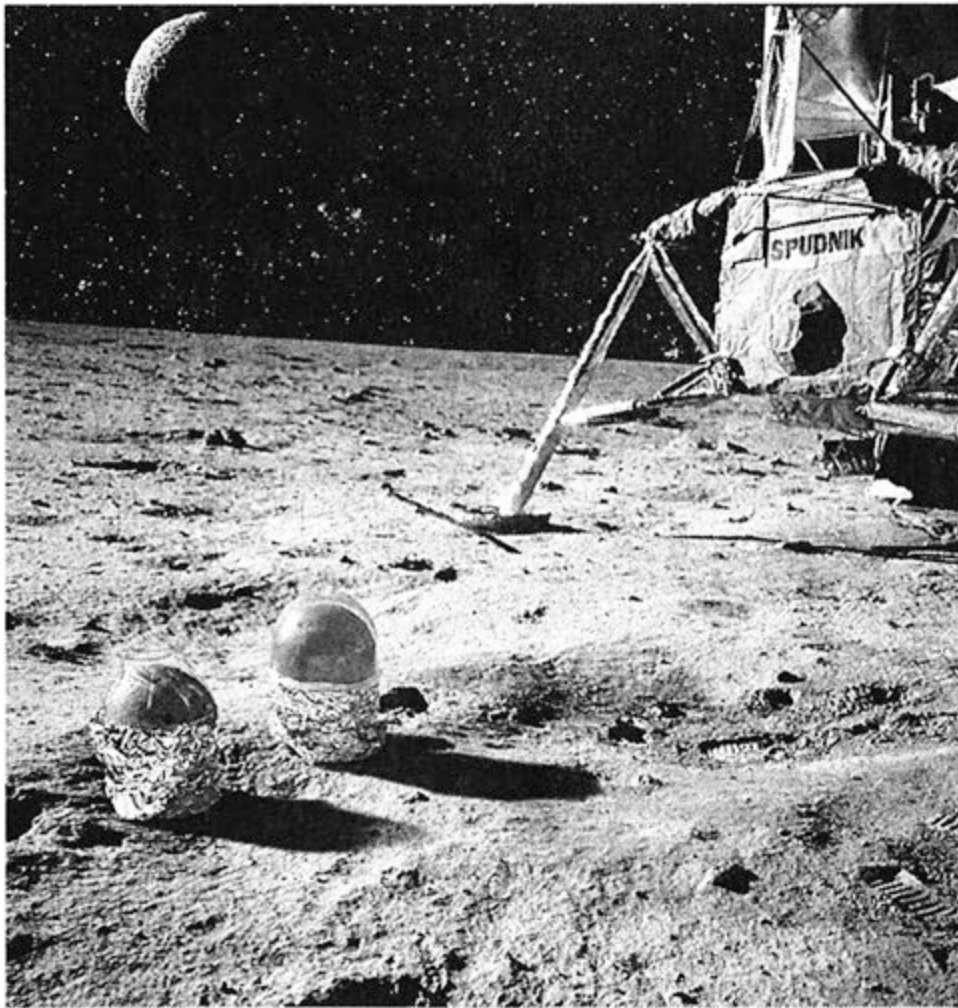
**Sandra Allen's "Schism," a photorealistic drawing of a tree, is on view at the DeCordova Museum.**

much of the meaning that Miebach evidently cares about will elude even the most sympathetic viewers, and too many of the complicated symbolic elements are more puzzling than visually exciting.

Samantha Fields also has an offbeat way with traditional craft. In a narrow second-floor space facing the museum's large front

window, she has installed a wall of white vinyl siding that she's cut out in places into floral patterns. She's added floral elements in colored yarn and trimmed the edges of many cut-out shapes with colored yarn as well. She also framed and covered the great window with an absurdly elaborate and funky arrangement of used, slightly grungy white curtains.





In Jeff "Jeffu" Warmouth's "Spudnik," the artist documents an outer-space exploration program developed by anthropomorphic potatoes.

### The 2007 DeCordova Annual Exhibition

At: DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, through Aug. 12. 781-259-3650, [decordova.org](http://decordova.org)

The point of Fields's work is not entirely clear. It suggests the excesses of a mad housewife, and it might be a commentary on middle-class consumerism. It promises a certain over-the-top nuttiness, but still has a way to go.

A clearer sense of purpose would also help the work of Jungil Hong, who creates expansive, elaborately detailed collages using pieces of her own richly colorful silkscreened images and patterns. Her works depict panoramic, primordial landscapes populated by birds and occasional cartoonish humans, and they hint at a mythic narrative. What prevails, however, is the patterning — a sumptuous amalgam of Victorian and Japanese styles. The visionary, story-telling dimension remains frustratingly obscure.

Ria Brodell, on the other hand,

has developed a clearly articulated world of imaginary creatures in drawings and in sculptures made of plastics, foams, paint, feathers, and other materials. They include "Sodmonsters" — big clumps of earth topped by grass with comical, humanoid faces sculpted into their muddy bodies — and "Wormbunnies," which are like furry snakes with rabbit heads and human eyes.

Closer to a toy designer and children's book illustrator than a fine artist, Brodell does not develop the darker, nightmarish possibilities implicit in her vision very far. Her cute sculptures and drawings look like they are ready for their big-screen, animated movie close-ups and for reproduction as Happy Meal miniatures.

Also more of a designer than an artist is Anne Lilly, who creates neatly machined kinetic sculptures in steel. Gently push one with your finger, and various rods and hoops revolve in impressively intricate movements. They would make excellent desktop toys for a business tycoon. As art, they are

vacuous, and they owe far too much to the work of George Rieckey and other kinetic sculptors.

There is just too much cleverness in this show. Elke Morris's large color photographs of scruffy apartment houses in Lewiston, Maine, might be affecting if presented straight, but the artist has manipulated them by blurring the focus in certain areas, which makes the buildings look oddly toy-like, as if they belonged to a model railroad setup. It's a gimmicky effect that quickly wears thin.

An award for sheer industry should be given to Sandra Allen for her life-size, photorealistic, graphite drawing of the trunk of a palm tree. Measuring 37 feet high, it fits neatly into the tall narrow wall opposite the DeCordova's main grand staircase. This monumental drawing highlights just how modest is the formal and technical ambition in most of the rest of the show.

That's not to deny that a great deal of technical effort and know-how goes into Sarah Amos's large prints. Printed on multiple sheets of paper that collectively measure 6½ feet high and up to 13 feet wide, Amos's works display layers of abstract patterning derived from a multitude of sources, including Japanese and Chinese prints, Australian aboriginal art, and Dutch lace. Realized mostly in earthy reds, browns, and yellows, Amos's compositions have a soothing, decorative quality, like New Age music. They would look good on the walls of a South Pacific-themed restaurant, but they fail to vigorously grab one's attention in an art gallery.

Amos's art is just too familiarly tasteful, and that's the problem with the DeCordova show in general. There's almost nothing in it that would have challenged the taste of viewers 25 years ago. There are artists in New England doing more to test the envelope of contemporary sensibility. The DeCordova needs to open its eyes wider.

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