

# THE BOSTON PHOENIX

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## Art

### OUR DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

THE 2009 BOSTON CYBERARTS FEST

BY GREG COOK

The installation *Children of Arcadia* convinced me that the 2009 Boston Cyberarts Festival isn't going to suck. I'd been worried because I've seen lots of local cyberart (or new-media, or tech art, or whatever you want to call it) since the previous Cyberarts Festival, in 2007, and too much of it had been disappointing.

This work by artists exploring new technologies is one of the distinctive sectors of Boston art. It offers frequent exciting flashes of promise, and yet it often feels stuck in beta mode: full of bugs and half-assed ideas and not ready for full implementation. I should say that the stuff I'm most fascinated by — complex new programming and tinkerer/inventor-type works — is by its very nature slow and labor-intensive to produce. But too often new-media artists get so caught up in developing the new media that they don't get around to developing the art.

Presented by Mark Skwarek, Arthur Peters, and Joseph Hocking at the Cambridge Arts Council (344 Broadway, Cambridge, through May 15), *Children of Arcadia* is an interactive computer simulation that allows you to roam a pastoral landscape of rolling hills dotted by towering trees, boulders, and classical ruins. (Their locations are pegged to the real-life New York Stock Exchange and other Manhattan landmarks.) The weather gets clear or stormy depending on the fluctuations of the stock market plus tallies of Google searches for "America + good" versus "America + evil." There's lots of lightning and thunder these days.

You can follow your avatar on a computer monitor, but that doesn't affect anything, so it's just about sightseeing (and, if you're me, getting lost and bumping into invisible walls), which soon loses its appeal. The knockout gorgeous part — the part that restored my hope for this year's Cyberarts Fest — is a 30x11-foot living digital panoramic "painting" of the entire scene that brings to mind American Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* paintings, an allegorical depiction of the rise and fall of society (Rome as a metaphor for the US).

The Cyberarts Fest offers some 60 events spread across Greater Boston. So much is going on that perhaps only founder and ringmaster George Fifield is able to see it all. The fest has an open-source format: pretty much anyone who wants to put on a relevant show in town during the time period (it began April 24) is allowed to take part. The results are hit-or-miss. At its best, the fest benefits from the many and various visions of its contributors.

One of these bests is Tamiko Thiel & Teresa Reuter's *Virtual Wall/ReConstructing the Wall* at the Goethe-Institut (170 Beacon Street, Boston, through May 6), an interactive digital simulation that allows you to explore either side of the Berlin Wall before it fell. This is an actual ghost town. Before your eyes, the city shifts forward and backward in time, a truck crashes through the gates and border guards shoot at it, the wall and the surrounding buildings rise or fall. (Bone up on Berlin Wall history before you go — the piece offers little context.) You can get arrested by border guards (cool), but the work is most riveting when you ascend to the top of a church tower and float like a spirit over the no-man's-land scar between Cold War East and West.

Dancer Ann Carlson and video artist Mary Ellen Strom present "New Performance Video" at the DeCordova Museum (51 Sandy Pond Road, Lincoln, through May 17). In one installation, a naked woman in what looks like a see-through raincoat stuffed with dollar bills dances around a cow. In others, lawyers dance absurdly in an elevator lobby, or four men drag boards along a beach, drawing parallel lines in the sand that are washed away by the surf. Certain images are striking, but the choreography feels stilted and clichéd; at one point the lawyers close their eyes and hold out their arms, as if to fly. And the work is larded with social and artistic references (the guys drawing lines as a reference to the "invisible nature of their own labor as construction workers" and to '60s Land Art) that feel underdeveloped and inbred.

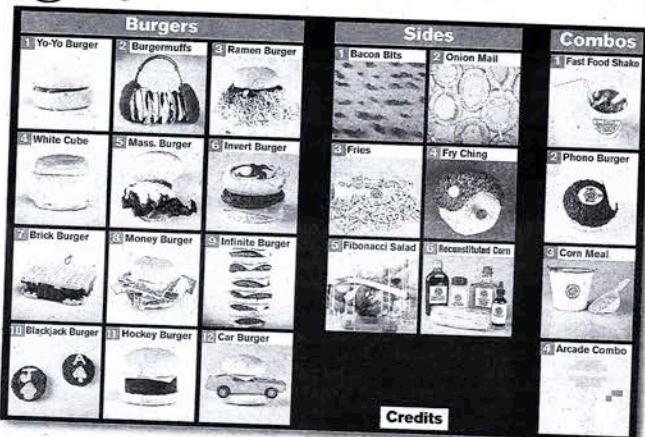
Instead, check out Georgie Friedman's *Geyser* at Boston College's Higgins Hall (140 Comm Ave, Chestnut Hill, through May 10). On two stacked televisions, she screens footage of Iceland geysers. The bottom one shows boiling water slosh-



RISE AND FALL If the market drops, the weather could turn stormy in *Children of Arcadia*, at the Cambridge Arts Council.



Medium Rare is the Message!



IT'S A HOOT Jeffu Warmouth's video installation at the Art Institute of Boston is a satiric face-off between McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken joints.

ing around a rocky pot until it explodes. The top shows clouds rolling by, and now and then the top of a geyser's splash. The installation is less elaborate — and correspondingly less dramatic — than some of her past work. It ruminates on the elemental nature of our world, but what grabs is its simple, elegant, luxuriously beautiful movement.

"Nourishment" at the Art Institute of Boston (700 Beacon Street, Boston, through May 3) features work by husband and wife Jeffu Warmouth and Ellen Wetmore. Warmouth's video installation is a satiric face-off between McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken joints. You order off interactive computer menus that feature a mix of conceptual and absurdist gags. One restaurant prepares your order (which often seems to involve Warmouth dumping a bucket of chickenish stuff on his head) while the other heckles (that guy will put anything in his burgers). A serious-silly joke about fast food and conceptual art, it's a hoot.

Since the birth of the couple's son a couple of years ago, Wetmore has been making work that explores pregnancy, motherhood, and nursing. Here she offers surreal wall decals riffing on motherhood

and an animated neon sign of a baby falling on its head. These pieces feel a bit rote. Her funny-strange videos (her son biting off her finger, her arm catching on fire, eyes sprouting and blinking on her pregnant belly) are more affecting because of their witty special effects and the way they creep under your skin.

Curator Leslie K. Brown continues her exploration of the elements of photography by rounding up nine artists who explore "the language of digital information" in "Syntax" at the Photographic Resource Center (832 Comm Ave, Boston, through May 10). Meggan Gould offers sweet, hazy, Rothko-esque pictures made by layering Google-image-search results. Brian Piana makes brightly hued animated abstractions of Web pages based on the experience of surfing the Net. Luke Strosnider represents Ansel Adams photos via Photoshop histograms that chart the tones in the images. The graphs look like jagged mountain ranges. Some of the images are lovely — Gould's and Piana's in particular — but the ideas feel a bit tired. How much art must we see based on Google searches? And Strosnider's charts are shallow, gimmicky insider jokes.

"Parse" at Axiom (141 Green Street, Jamaica Plain, through May 10) rounds up six artists "visualizing data that makes us human." Jason Salavon layers Google-image-search results (1), but his work is more affecting than Gould's because his subjects (newlyweds, kids with Santa) tap our collective memories. Fernanda Viegas and Martin Wattenberg present posters charting surveys of where people like to be touched on their bodies or like to touch others. The answer — surprise, surprise — is genitals. More unexpected is a poster charting which body parts turn up most frequently in various music genres. Eyes win most categories. Hip-hop — you guessed it — prefers the booty. But how come hands are favored in blues and gospel? @

BOSTON CYBERARTS FESTIVAL | Numerous locations in Greater Boston | Through May 10 | [www.bostoncyberarts.org](http://www.bostoncyberarts.org)