

Artistic composition of another kind

Exhibition interprets and converts the well-known lined writing book

Review by DAVID GRIMA



"Study for a Black Hole," is by Sean Ryan, featuring a revolving vortex set in a desktop. DAVID GRIMA

The composition book on your desk slowly begins to revolve, as the desk beneath it opens up into a void and the book dissolves into the miniature whirlpool. Like Alice, you realize you are being pulled down into the vortex, into another world.

ROCKPORT — A hot afternoon late in spring, the teacher's voice drones like bees although the words lost all meaning half an hour ago in the sunlight streaming through the classroom window.

As you drift away the composition book on your desk slowly begins to revolve, the desk beneath it opens up into a void, and the book dissolves into the miniature whirlpool. Like Alice, you dreamily realize you are being pulled down into the vortex, into another world.

This is just one of the mental images conjured up by a piece of three-dimensional art featured in Composition 101, the show in the upper gallery at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, which opened last Saturday and is to close June 7.

Curated by artists Diana Cherbuliez, Erica Hansen, and Sean Ryan, the project asked almost 40 artists to take the well-known school composition book produced by the Mead company and use it in some way as the basis for a piece of art.

The piece described above is called "Study for a Black Hole," and is by Ryan. He uses a small tape-recorder mounted under the desktop to provide the rotary motion for the vortex. The array of ideas and uses demonstrated by the other artists in the show is fascinating, a truly attractive and successful attempt, I believe, to show the diversity of human imagination as it diverges from a single spot.

Several of the pieces feature videotape loops. David Holbrook's response to the composition book was to draw shapes on each page in the manner of an animated flip book, the way we used to make little stick men come alive by drawing successive images on each corner of a set of pages.

Then the artist videotaped the book using stop-motion animation methods to set the images alive, rising and falling over the pages. The tape is shown continuously on a television screen mounted in a wooden pedestal.

Cherbuliez converted her book into a pop-up book of drawings of her childhood route to school, then videotaped herself turning each page. At the last moment a live flame appears on the final page and begins to burn the paper, but we see her hands slam the book shut, extinguishing the dangerous flame but cutting off all view of the pictures.

(She tells me her father is a psychiatrist.)

Alison Hildreth punched out a human figure shape from the center of her book, and transformed each paper-thin character into images of language escaping from the book.

Catey Draper made a suit out of paper — a rhyme that adds to my delight at seeing clothes made out of such impractical material. But she went one step further, photographing a woman wearing the suit, and so we have a second thing to look at and think about.

And so it goes on, each artist presenting something extraordinary to look at, to ponder. Some do not even make use of the physical book at all, but simply borrow ideas based upon the cover design or the paper inside. This show just has to be visited, must be seen — it sets the imagination loose.

Children, especially, will love to see what has happened in this room, although I am told the gallery has decided to warn patrons that there are three representations of a penis to be seen.

Composition 101 is one of three parallel shows at the gallery. The two others feature photographs taken in St. Petersburg, Russia, by Jack Montgomery, and fascinating ceramics by Lucy Breslin, Ray Chen, Lynn Durea, and Mark Johnson.

This whole show was not ready when I visited on Good Friday, but I did see Breslin's work, which is something. CMCA on Russell Avenue in Rockport village is open 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Tuesdays through Saturdays. Admission is \$3, although it is free to children, Rockport residents, and members. Call 236-2875 or visit www.artsmaine.org.