ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT B

THE CAMDEN HERALD MAY 23, 2002

Ceramic rats by Pia Walker suggest a flea-bitten trinity. DAVID GRIMA

The Rat — the biennial juried show

Review by David Grima

ROCKPORT —Some ratty art can be seen at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art's biennial juried show.

I spent 15 minutes last Thursday afternoon trying to provoke an uncooperative white and pink rat into doing his part for art. The rat, who refused to be instigated into action, is currently a resident in a cage containing a rat wheel displayed at the gallery. The wheel is connected to a gear, which in turn is connected to a set of wire levers that activate half a dozen wire posts that project through one wall of the rat cage, a wall that happens to be made of carved apple wood.

The carved relief shows three characters, whom I interpret to be Adam and Eve, and a legal representative of their heavenly father above. Their arms are fixed to the pivoting wire posts.

At the risk of making a fool of myself, I will assume that when the reluctant rat does its stuff on the wheel the whole machinery is set in motion and the characters in Eden swing their arms in what must resemble a sort of dance.

I have no proof the dancers live in Eden, other than the appearance of what might be fig leaves in their hands, and the hint contained in the choice of wood used for the carving.

Nor can I absolutely prove that the rat really does set Eden swinging. It might be one of those modern jokes, in which nothing the rat does can make any difference because there is some fatal disconnect in the machinery planted to frustrate all its ratty efforts.

But the rat's reluctance on Thursday afternoon made it difficult for me to be absolutely sure. And this element of uncertainty, in the end, became part of the presentation.

Of course, we could look at this piece from the opposite point of view, starting with the carved figures whose actions appear to have some significance, but whose apparent meaning is traced eventually to the unwitting efforts of a low-grade life form imprisoned in a small cage. On the assumption (there I go again) that art is meant to be more of a commentary

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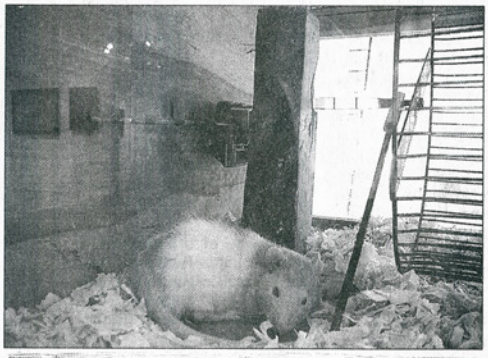

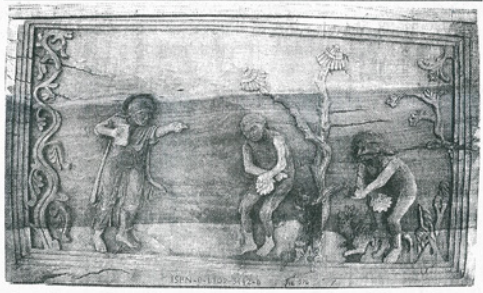

"Self Portrait" by Diana Cherbuliez consists of a rat in a cage who seems to have the power, if not the inclination, to make carved wooden figures at the front of its cage dance in the Garden of Eden. DAVID GRIMA

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Even more sadly, artist Diana Cherbuliez has entitled the piece "Self Portrait." The elements of the piece, a rat wheel and a religious carving, are mundane. But the artist's decision to link them in this way is creative, if depressing.

Just a few feet from the Cherbuliez piece are three other rats, this time life-size ceramic sculptures made by Pia Walker. Having been so affected by the live rat show, it is hard not to reflect just as gloomily upon the sculpted rats.

Is this some kind of triumvirate of flea-bearing animals, an undesirable trinity? Is this one more rant about the spiritual condition? Heaven knows.

Next to the rats is a tall mahogany ladder inlaid with dozens of glass eyes, also by Walker. Searching about in the attic of my miseducated mind, my first thought is of Jacob's dream ladder upon which he saw angels ascending and descending.

The natural prohibition against stepping on anybody's eyes — and these appear to be both human and animal — seems to suggest that this is a ladder not intended for use in the ordinary way. This is certainly no ladder by which one will easily gain entrance to heaven, not without a lot of nerve, because it is looking at you.

What are the eyes for? Eyes are said to be windows of the soul, so does this suggest countless souls that never made it off the ladder, itself a device often used as a metaphor for life itself?

Walker calls the piece "Truth is a Tree," and this sets up all kinds of possible ideas, the most fundamental being that, whatever the ladder does represent, it is not to be argued with. It represents a truth that cannot be escaped from, which seems to be one more reflection on the spiritual condition.

Other work

These three pieces are a small part of the full exhibition, which contains the work of 58 of the 481 artists who submitted art for the show.

A surprisingly high proportion of the works are photographic images, ranging from Dennis Schultz's ethereal pair ("Burning Bush" and "Cape Surf") to some others that are less profound in their observation, composition, and presentation.

I always have time to look at photos by Kathie Florsheim and Denise Froelich. I have confused them before, but they are distinct in this show.

Of paintings there are fewer than have been included in past juried shows. Elizabeth Awalt's two large-scale pieces,

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Plastic sculpture by Richard Van Buren, one of four pieces, was named as best of show by the jury.
DAVID GRIMA

Matt Cote's untitled work is done in house paint.

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"Autumn's Fury" and "October's Gold," are impressive in part because she dares to work big and boldly, and also handles the idea of form rather well.

"Frank Floyd & Satchel Paige" by Jessica Gandalf is a beautiful rendering in oil, setting the hard physical facts about boxing against a soft and picturesque back cloth. Other pieces show Chuck Wepner on the ropes, and a very young Cassius Clay, all executed in a delicious manner, the more so for being so small.

I particularly like Matt Cote's untitled painting, just shy of 17 inches wide by 9 deep, made with ordinary house paint. It's loosely organic images are beautifully executed, and coincidentally bear a striking resemblance to the works that the jurors picked as best of show.

These are four sculptures by Richard Van Buren, made of thermo plastic and acrylic paint. They possibly resemble organs from the interior of some alien body, or galaxies of uncountable gas clouds, billions of miles across, which is quite a range of physical proportions.

Overall, whether they tend to resemble something literal or not to the viewer, they are fascinating pieces, wholly absorbed in the idea of shape and color, but especially of texture. Among other thoughts, one is confronted with the perplexing notion that here is something you want to touch very badly, to explore with your fingertips its bubbly, undulating, surfaces, but which it is absolutely forbidden to touch.

Sounds like forbidden fruit to me, which brings us back, without it being too contrived a link, to the Garden of Eden and the uncooperative rat.

Van Buren, who lives in Perry, will receive a solo exhibition in the gallery as reward for being chosen best of show. Walker, who lives in Liberty and whose work has been reviewed positively in The Camden Herald more than once before, received a commendation, and so did Anne Neely of Jonesport, who presents two large oil paintings.

Exhibitors

Jurors for this show are John Stomberg, director of Boston University's Art Galleries, Christine Vincent, president of the Maine College of Art in Portland, and Mark Wethli, painter and director of Visual Arts at Bowdoin College in Brunswick.

Artists in the show are Steven Albert, Michael Alpert, Elizabeth Awalt, Katharine Ayer, C. H. Becksvoort, Jeffery Becton, Susan Bennett, Thomas Birtwistle, Michelle Bolduc, Alan Bradstreet, Alan Bray, Mary Allen Chaisson, Diana Cherbuliez, Trevor Corp, Matthew Cote, Sara Crisp, Andrew Cross, Scott Davis, Kyle Durrie, Lynn Duryea, Kendra Ferguson, Alan Fishman, Kathie Florsheim, Denise Froelich, Jessica Gandolf, Jennifer Gardiner, Jane Halliwell, Michelle Hauser, Linda Hirsch, Frances Hodsdon, Tanja Alexia Hollander, Jill Hoy, Pamela Johnson, Cassie Jones, Michael Kolster, Ann Lofquist, Wally Mason, Dirk McDonnell, Peter Michelena, Garry Mitchell, Elke Morris, Anne Neely, Jacelyn Ouellette, Scott Peterman, Alison Rector, Miranda Ring, Whitney River, Jan Rosenbaum, Dennis Shultz, David Stess, Andrea Sulzer, Susan Tureen, Sam van Aken, Richard Van Buren, Carol Wainright, Pia Walker, Henry Wolyniec, Michael Zachary.

The show runs through June 16, and will be held next spring at the Portland Museum of Art, under the arrangement whereby the two galleries take it in turns to stage the event. No animals were harmed during the writing of this review.

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