

ArtadiaBoston2007

IN CELEBRATION OF THE ARTADIA AWARDS 2007 BOSTON

By Laura Donaldson

Boston is often noted as a city both rich in culture and steeped in history, and also as a “walking city,” meaning it is close set enough to be easily navigated on foot. The arts community of Boston is similar—while there is depth and range to the kinds of artists found here, the community is close-knit, with degrees of separation rarely approaching six. I know most of the artists chosen for this first program of Artadia Awards in Boston, either from working together in the past or from seeing their work over the years in exhibitions. A few of the artists were unknown to me, which underlines the importance of bringing fresh eyes to the selection process amid the constant influx of new talent to the area.

In no small part, the growth of the arts community is due to the sheer density of colleges and universities in the area, not to mention the more than half-dozen art schools in the city and surrounding region. While there is an ever-evolving pool of new voices and activity among undergraduate and graduate students, the area also attracts and retains a large number of talented artists to teach, as artists in residence, and so forth. It should be noted that almost all of the Artadia Awards 2007 Boston recipients have taught or are currently teaching in Boston.

Whenever parameters are set by geography, it raises the question: Is there a regionalism that can be quantified? While there are themes and through lines to be found among the artists selected—social activism integrated into artistic practice, an interest in scientific research as source, collaboration and cross-disciplinary approaches, documentation, art historical references,

the natural world and how we relate to it—this group is notable for its diversity of aesthetics, viewpoints, and media. As a microcosm of the Boston arts scene, the Artadia Awards 2007 Boston recipients provide a good idea of the range of artists to be found in the area. Although some genres may be closely associated with Boston and with New England in general—most notably, the region has a strong painting history and a deeply rooted craft tradition—the community as a whole is more reflective of larger trends in the art world than any local school of thought.

In his black-and-white photographs of prisons, **Stephen Tourlentes** illuminates what is hidden in plain sight. Traveling around the United States to small towns and rural communities, out into the desert, or into the backyards of middle-America, Tourlentes shoots the prisons at night and mostly from a distance. For obvious reasons, the prisons are flooded with light, making them visible for miles around. Shimmering like mirages, they are illusory; the glowing lights do not mask oases but usually bland industrial complexes. Tourlentes focuses on the light, highlighting how it acts as a beacon. We are naturally drawn towards the glow, which is otherworldly as seen through Tourlentes’s lens.

More cinematic are the photos taken in middle-class neighborhoods set cheek by jowl with the prisons in their midst. Taken from quiet, empty suburban streets, we see tidy houses and well-kept lawns, with the preternatural glow of the prison looming what seems only yards away. It feels like a set from a science fiction movie, the night air heavy with portent.

This eeriness captures the seeming obliviousness of the public to the burgeoning prison industry and its attendant societal implications, while the sheer beauty of the photographs beguiles and compels one to look closer.

Combining installation, performance, and sculpture, **John Osorio-Buck** creates quietly playful and quixotic works that take on issues of urban housing, sustainability, and self-reliance. Over the last several years, the artist has built a number of temporary housing structures out of recycled and untraditional materials—a hay bale house, a plywood and plastic rolling pod, a cardboard tube tent—and has lived in them on the streets, in galleries, and perhaps best known, on the water. In that particular work, *W.T.L.F.P.C.A.P.T.O.T.L. (Will the Last Fort Point Channel Artist Please Turn Out the Lights)* (2004), Osorio-Buck and fellow artist Matthew Ward built and launched a raft on the Fort Point Channel in South Boston that they then lived on for several months, a wry comment on the wholesale eviction of artists from a neighborhood that was slated for rapid gentrification (Osorio-Buck and Ward were among those evicted).

By building and living in these works, Osorio-Buck invites a dialogue with the public, activating his art to address social issues in an engaging and non-didactic way. Most recently, he has deepened and expanded his exploration of sustainability to include investigations into hydroponics, solar panels, and other “systems of survival,” such as those used by scientists to live in Antarctica and NASA’s designs for inhabiting other planets. Creating his own versions

of remote way stations, Osorio-Buck makes these out-of-reach environments tangible and relevant.

Collaboration, performance, and art-historical references are recurring motifs in **Mary Ellen Strom**’s video installations and site-specific projects. Her collaborators have ranged from New York City garment workers, day laborers, and lawyers to fellow artists. Often the power in the work arises out of the sense of seamless communication and rhythm between Strom and those in front of the camera; the energy of those invested in the creation of the work feels palpable, natural, and wholly unforced. A good example of this is Strom’s series *Nudes* (2005–06), which involved the re-creation of historical paintings of female nudes in video form, in collaboration with contemporary women artists. The beauty of the body is overlaid with the powerful sense of live flesh and the ownership of the traditional male gaze as each woman commands attention, their confidence as successful artists informing every breath.

In recent collaborations with artist and choreographer Ann Carlson, Strom has worked with non-artists to create works that remind us how deeply resonant and poetic simple gestures can be. *Four Parallel Lines* (2007), created with Carlson and José Bautista, Joel Gomez, Lisandrow Vicente, and Carlos Hernandez—four men who work as day laborers—references the earthwork *Two Parallel Lines* (1968) by Walter De Maria. As the video begins, the four men are lined up on a beach at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, solitary on an overcast day.

They start to walk backwards, each drawing a parallel line in the sand with a 6-by-2-inch wooden plank. The camera shot is stationary, and the men slowly recede into the distance as the rising tide erases the lines they've drawn. The simplicity of this work is stunning in its eloquence, bringing to mind questions of life, death, the futility of labor, and the inherent human desire to leave one's mark.

Intimations of old-world master draftsmen and print-makers can be found in the alternating, densely layered, and spare lines of **Xiaowei Chen's** intricately detailed black-and-white ink drawings. An organic mix of nature and man, the drawings are dark and slightly macabre in their ornateness, thrown into sharp relief against starkly bare backgrounds. Created as if by stream of consciousness, bodies grow out of branches, limbs twist and bend as buds sprout out of necks, and hair melds with tangled vines over the planar surfaces. There are elements of surrealism in the fantastical melting bodies, as well as references to traditional Chinese scroll paintings in the composition and structuring of Chen's pieces. There is also a sense of the mythological in the depictions of life and death intertwined in the netherworld of some fantastical planet.

In Chen's ink-wash paintings, the long, narrow scroll format is emphasized, while the underlying themes of birth and rebirth become more explicit, albeit in softer strokes. In one of these works a baby is shown alone, suspended in air, still attached by its umbilical cord to the placenta, which floats above, slightly bowing like a wilting flower. In another, a little girl perches on a branch while far above her a plane flies away. While still slightly melancholic, these works are more ambiguous in their intentions and provide room for cautious optimism.

Over the past eighteen years, **Vaughn Sills** has been traveling to the South to photograph dozens of African-American gardens and their creators. Her series

Places for the Spirit documents a particular aesthetic that has been shaped by geography, economics, and cultural and historical traditions. Sills shoots the gardens in the summer, and one can feel the sun and smell the air in the warm light she captures. Sharp and amazingly detailed, the photographs bring the beauty of the gardens close. The alternately sprawling and thickly packed gardens display vegetables, flowers, and assorted gewgaws: plastic containers of all sizes and shapes, bottles, old toys, ceramic jugs, chairs, benches, statues, whirligigs, countless repurposed tires, and innumerable permutations of planters. Even in the less-crowded yards, one might find that the dirt has been swept, with bushes carefully shaped and tree branches bent to create archways, and with assorted carefully chosen objects dotting the landscape.

Like the quilting traditions of the South, Sills depicts an example of a purer understanding of recycling—it's all put to use, whether out of necessity, decorative choices, or for symbolic implications. In fact, what might strike the casual observer as whimsical and idiosyncratic often has deeper meanings for those who believe that to be in the garden is to experience the spiritual world. As in many cultures, there is a belief in the power of objects to communicate with the spiritual world—bottles and plant pots are put on tree branches or laid in the garden to capture evil spirits, while pipes are placed vertically in the ground to allow the spirits of ancestors to breathe. While these gardens serve multiple purposes for their owners—to grow food and flowers, and as social gathering spots—they are also vibrant reminders of the value of preserving traditions and regional identity.

At first glance, the people in **Hannah Barrett's** current series of paintings are vaguely Victorian in their clothing and hairstyles. They resemble people one would see in any number of black-and-white photos from the late nineteenth century, garbed in corseted

dressess and plumed hats, wearing pronounced ringlets or sporting facial hair that is sculptural in its precise shaping. But it is quickly apparent that these are no ordinary folks—many appear to be half-man, half-woman, sporting mutations of genetic traits that would rarely exist outside of fervent inbreeding, perhaps most closely associated with royalty (and the works' vaguely Anglicized titles slyly further this impression). To arrive at these works, Barrett combines feminine and masculine signifiers in collages assembled from old photographs and paintings, and then uses these "invented portraits" as the basis for her grisaille oil paintings. She further tweaks the portrait format by subtly distorting the proportions of the figures and the arrangement of certain facial features, which seem slightly askew, although what is off is not immediately apparent.

Although there is the touch of the sideshow poster in the enticing otherness of these personages, the lack of color and sensationalism puts them more in the realm of a parallel world, where the assembled are indistinguishable from respectable upper-middle-class patrons, decorous and conventional in their Sunday best. This series continues the themes of social class, identity, and gender roles explored in earlier works where Barrett blended physical traits of known subjects, in particular her parents, to create personas that were extraordinary in their ordinariness.

Gerry Bergstein's latest multi-media works wear his influences out in the open, for everyone to see. In a continually evolving sculptural installation, Bergstein takes copies of his favorite art, high and low, and combines them to form an exuberant mass of imagery. It's like an artist's inspiration wall balled up and made to come to life: out of this tangled ball of faces, limbs, and forms, eyes pop out, hands reach, and an occasional shoe shoves forward as if to take a step and keep the whole group moving along. Looking closely at the work can be like an art-history survey course,

with bits of Fra Angelico, Max Beckman, Lucian Freud, Lisa Yuskavage, Michelangelo, Carroll Dunham, Cindy Sherman, Goya, and Frida Kahlo, to name just a few of the artists whose works make an appearance. One can also pick out parts of cartoonist Matt Groening's oeuvre (Marge Simpson's eyes are clearly identifiable to anyone raised on *The Simpsons*), and the boot of R. Crumb's Mr. Natural is often the one looking like it's trying to break free.

There is ample evidence of collage's roots in Cubism and Dada, with a healthy dose of Philip Guston's bulbous aesthetic mixed in to bind it all together. Bergstein also photographs this three-dimensional collage and combines the photographs with paint against backdrops that suggest a sci-fi outer space, vivid and slightly cartoony; in one work, Richard Serra's "Torqued Ellipses" orbit like satellites. These pieces allow Bergstein to tweak and add to the imagery, including bits of his own artworks. Images of his wife and parents also occasionally slip in (they're influences too). And if you look very carefully, that small figure of a man off to the side—holding on to the tumbling ball of art by a string or gazing up in awe—would be Bergstein himself.

Helen Mirra creates quiet moments of intervention, finding her forms in the understated and transitory. She works in a range of media, including sound, text, and sculpture; the choice of medium is conceptually driven, with much of her inspiration deriving from the natural world and how people interact with it. The works are often site-specific, created to be integral to the setting, whether that is a contemporary white-cube exhibition space or an alternative location. For example, *Instance the determination*, a recent work, is sited in the stairwells and hallways of the campus buildings at the University of Chicago. There, scraps of text painted on the walls feature words indexed and repurposed from the texts of two books by authors closely associated with the University and

the City of Chicago; removed from their context, they assume new import in their everyday setting, as elusive and brief as haikus.

Much of Mirra's work is spare and experiential and is often described as poetic by curators and critics. This is also due in part to a consistently minimalist approach and a measured nature, which provides content that is open to interpretation. In a new piece created for the Artadia Awards 2007 Boston exhibition, Mirra will present a sound work sited in the Boston Center for the Art's Cyclorama. Built at the end of the nineteenth century to house a panoramic mural of the Battle of Gettysburg (long since removed), the Cyclorama's main space is a large, open, round room topped by a broad glass dome. Mirra will perform here intermittently with a small set of three custom-made drums during the run of the exhibition. In this space, originally built to house a paean to a horrific battle and to provide entertainment for the masses, Mirra offers a percussive, solitary rejoinder that is timely and elegiac.

In an ongoing series of digital images, videos, online projects, and sculptures, **Jane Marsching** draws upon scientific data from a wide array of research to explore the impact of climate change on the environment, as well as our relationship to these changes both historically and into the future. *Arctic Listening Post* (begun in 2005) is interdisciplinary and collaborative, activist and aesthetic, technological and relational. The Arctic region is the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, of global warming—it is the harbinger of what the rest of the planet will eventually face. Marsching seeks to translate this reality and make the impending climate changes come to life in works that visually blend science and art, imagination and fact.

Sometimes the results are fanciful—acrobats and vaudevillian performers are digitally placed

in virtual arctic landscapes based on data gathered by glaciologists, a riff on the practice of nineteenth-century explorers who sought to bring every imaginable entertainment with them for their long journeys. Sometimes the works more closely hew to the research models they derive from, with a networked online dialogue about climate change, sustainability, and the Arctic plotted in interactive graphs and charts. A new video installation on view in this exhibition beautifully unites formalist concerns with abstract information. A two-color box—one color for the earth and one for the atmosphere—is projected to slowly change colors as they correspond to predicted changes in Earth's temperature in the coming decades. At the same time, one hears an opera singer repeatedly perform the first twenty headlines Marsching found when she Googled the word *Arctic*. The simplicity of these different elements allows a complex experience to wash over the viewer and the deeper implications to sink in.

The National Bitter Melon Council (NBMC) is an artist collective that creates interactive public events using the form and concept of performance art as a model for community development. The group, composed of Hiroko Kikuchi, Jeremy Chi-Ming Liu, and Andi Sutton, uses the construct of a national promotional board (motto: Better Living Through Bitter Melon) as the umbrella for a broad spectrum of activities, which are designed to be engaging and illuminating for both the producers and participants. The bitter melon—bitterest of all edible vegetables and not widely known in this country (it is predominately known in Asian cultures and cuisine, although it is an acquired taste even in those settings)—is an unlikely tool for creating dialogue. It is this very foreignness and duality of meaning (bitter is not only a flavor, of course, but also an emotion) that the NBMC cleverly uses as the basis for its need to do outreach and education.

While employing the guise of corporate marketing tools—there is a bitter melon recipe booklet and informational handouts listing facts and figures, not to mention a crowd-friendly mascot—the NBMC also uses grassroots organizing strategies within its social performance interventions. A “seed bomb” event invites participants to write reasons why they are bitter on napkins that are then used to hold soil and bitter melon seeds; these are later distributed for others to take and plant. And if one has a few minutes, the NBMC can administer the “Meyers-Bitter Survey” to determine one’s position on the bitterness/peace/pride/humility continuum (which gently skewers the well-known Myers-Briggs personality test in the process). All of these activities serve to actively engage the public and provide a forum for interaction and dialogue between activists, artists, and audience. While these social performance investigations are documenting society, the creators behind the NBMC are also refining their evolving hypothesis: is it, truly, better living through bitter melon?

The adage about the world today, that it has grown ever smaller and more knowable with the advent of modern technology, is true also of the art world. This means that while it is likely that a few cities will always remain major epicenters of the art world, the locales where art is actually made can be further afield. The Artadia Awards 2007 Boston program serves to highlight the reality that exceptionally talented artists can be found all around the country, and the value of this service cannot be underestimated, both to individual artists and the arts community as a whole. It has been gratifying to be part of this process and a pleasure to work with Boston’s inaugural Artadia Awards recipients.



Mary Ellen Strom
 Collaboration with Ann Carlson
Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg & Moore, 2007
 Video still
 Duration: 4 minutes, 30 seconds
 Courtesy Judi Rotenberg Gallery, Boston, and Alexander Gray Associates, New York

MARY ELLEN STROM

EDUCATION

MFA University of California, Irvine, 1998

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 *Mary Ellen Strom and Ann Carlson*, Judi Rotenberg Gallery, Boston
Mary Ellen Strom and Ann Carlson, Myrna Loy Center for the Performing & Media Arts, Helena, MT
- 2007 *Mary Ellen Strom and Ann Carlson*, Alexander Gray Associates, New York
In Practice: Fall '07, SculptureCenter, Long Island City, NY
At Work, Judi Rotenberg Gallery, Boston (solo)
Saint-Gaudens Fellows Exhibition, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, NH
- 2006 *Ghosts in the Machine*, SF Camerawork, San Francisco
Future Memory, Judi Rotenberg Gallery, Boston (solo)
Can We Fall In Love With a Machine?, Wood Street Galleries, Pittsburgh Cultural Trust
Technologized Bodies/Embodied Technologies, Art Interactive, Boston
- 2005 *Appropriate Appropriation*, Gray Kapernekus Gallery, New York
The Nudes, Judi Rotenberg Gallery, Boston (solo)
Homomuseum, Exit Art, New York
CAke, site-specific video installation, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York (with Ann Carlson)
- 2003 *Geyser Land*, site-specific video installation, Bozeman, MT (with Ann Carlson)
Remedy, video installation, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (with Ann Carlson)
- 2002 *Too Beautiful a Day*, video installation, Center for Cultural Exchange, Portland, ME
The Drawing Show, Mills Gallery, Boston Center for the Arts

SELECTED AWARDS AND HONORS

- 2007 LEF Foundation Contemporary Work Fund Grant
- 2006 Saint-Gaudens Prize, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, NH, Fellowship
Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, CA, Residency
- 2005 Rockefeller Foundation Multi-Arts Project Grant
- 2004 Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio Center, Italy, Residency
- 2003 Paul Allen Foundation Grant
- 1999 Creative Capital Grant
P.S.1/MoMA National Studio Program
- 1995 New York Dance and Performance ("Bessie") Award, Outstanding Creative Achievement

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- Gener, Randy. "The Kids Stay in the Picture." *Village Voice* (April 16, 1996).
- Knight, Christopher. "The Socio-Art Genre." *Los Angeles Times* (March 18, 1997).
- McQuaid, Cate. "At Play in the Halls of Power." *Boston Globe* (September 20, 2007).
- Nash, Matthew. "The Nudes." *Bigredandshiny.com* (May 1, 2005).
- Perron, Wendy. "Geyser Land." *New York Times* (August 11, 2003).
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