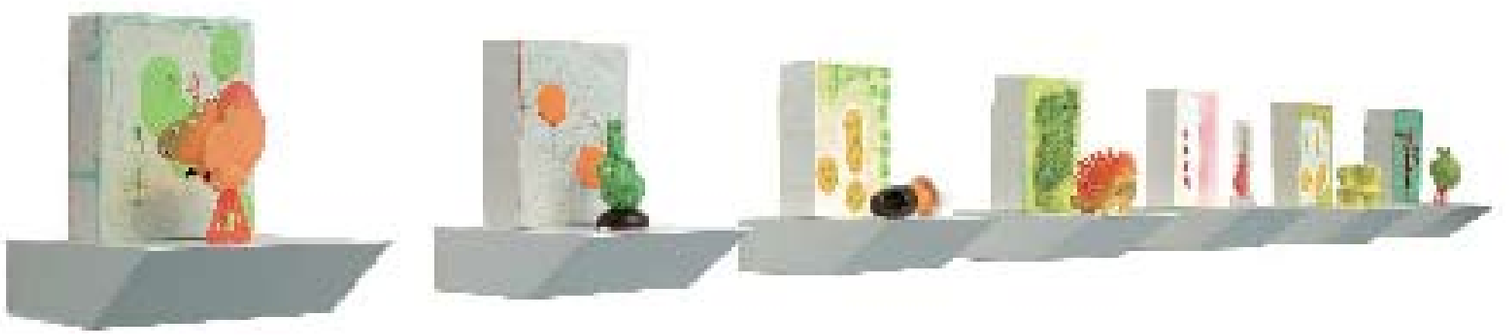
OFF THE WALL:
2008 Annual Members' Juried Exhibition



The Little Fruits (Installation View) by Deborah Bohnert

Danforth Museum of Art
123 Union Avenue
Framingham, Massachusetts

Through August 3

BEHIND A PLAIN FAÇADE, THE MEMBERS' SHOW AT THE DANFORTH MUSEUM IS A CORNUCOPIA OF ART FILLED WITH SURPRISES TO ATTRACT THE STEADY GAZE. WHEN I ARRIVED IN FRAMINGHAM IT WAS DRIZZLING COLD, BUT WITH SUCH A QUANTITY OF QUALITY, I FELT LIKE I WAS STEPPING ONTO A WARM BEACH SHELVING TOWARDS LAPPING BLUE WATERS. I KEPT MY PEN AND NOTEBOOK DRY, BUT BARELY.

Director Katherine French showed me around while explaining the genesis of this landfall. She and her staff have been diligently stirring the waters of New England to bring artists of talent and ambition into the fold of membership, welcoming them with annual group shows of juried paintings.

Add a strong selective intelligence to this mix, such as Institute of Contemporary Art curator Carole Anne Meehan, and voila, you have roomfuls of art to be proud of, for art lovers to feast upon and for artists themselves to spy out the competition and expose their creativity to vital cross-fertilization. Perfect? Not quite.

Membership and submissions to member shows have been growing vigorously. Enough so that when guest curator Meehan had filled her allotted space there was still too much evidence of quality to permit to slip away. So, French and her staff hauled their permanent collection into temporary storage and filled two more galleries with additionally selected works. And it works!

On the principle of "last shall be first" I plunged to the end of the two galleries of additionally selected works to a tiny room where I came upon Eleanora Lecei's apocalyptic chickens, "# 1 and #2. " They reminded me of nothing else I'd seen before, except perhaps Medardo Rosso's poignantly modeled wax busts. They evoked both strutting, clucking barnyard chickens, and also two ghostly avian individuals with an uncanny aura of apocalypse. Who knew?

I left the two chickens and a small oil painting of a donkey spreading its front legs fetchingly to drink in a pool just beyond the picture's foreground, and stepped into a world of wings.

Just a word about organization is perhaps due. French and her staff have grouped paintings not rigidly but just tightly enough so that there is often a family resemblance

Patience by Carol Gove

Icarus by Mario Kon

TOP: Putting Herself Out There by Laura Schiff Bean
BOTTOM: Visual Literacy by Lana Citowsky

of figurative to figurative, abstract to abstract. Or, as I found myself here, standing amidst wings - on the wall as photographs and drawings, and off the wall as kinetic sculptures moving to my motion.

In two marvelous sculptures dedicated to Icarus' dad, Dedaelus, David Lang conjures the wise old guy and all his regret and longing for his lost son Icarus - he who in Greek myth rashly flew too close to the sun.

As the viewer moves around the bases of these two sculptures, whisper-thin tubes of copper rub against each other with barely audible vibration in order to transfer their motion through carefully Byzantine pathways, to delicately jointed white wings. It was impossible for me to take just one pass; I circled like a planet to hear their music and see their wings lift off again and again – as fragile as hope.

From the spectacular to the more quietly provocative, there was much to absorb in the Community of Artists galleries selected by the staff. As I reluctantly left the foremost gallery, I glanced back at an apparition of a maid in a ball gown made entirely of coffee-filters, eyelets, colored threads, etc., dancing in the air currents.

Looking at the paintings in the outer galleries, selected by Meehan, I was reminded of this gown as I stood in front of another gown, also unfilled, except for a ghostly presence. In lush, coruscating oils, Laura Schiff Bean has summoned in "Putting Herself Out There" the archetypal ball gown, which recalls all those occasions when special clothes bodied forth the excitement of a debut. Splashes, drips and brushed slashes of white bring this apparitional gown to life on a midnight background. For me, this ball gown was a feminine counterpoint to the freestanding bathrobes suavely posed by Jim Dine as "Pop" art dawned in the 1960s. Bean's gown has an imaginative force and elusive presence all its own: it creates a decorative and decorous ruckus with exquisite drawing and a concert of memories.

At the other end of the long outer gallery, amidst a roomful of daring abstracts, sculptor Mario Kon creates his own ruckus with "Icarus." Thin slabs of wood are carved and stained and cut with vertical and horizontal scorings as though Icarus were trying, in mid-air, to align all his forces for his mighty, and tragic, climb to the sun. How different from father Dedaelus' careful parsing of mature powers in Lang's ironic and lyrical interpretation.

These were some of my favorites, but out of deep fields of strength. As I left, others worth an initial glance were already drawing longer looks. Next time.

Concurrently to the members' show, Ana Maria Pacheco's installation "Dark Night of the Soul" holds forth in a physical and psychological space all its own. I found it an especially affecting experience to stand in the midst of Pacheco's life-sized wood sculptures and participate in their timeless human narrative.

There's the word "time" again. Plan for a day to renew yourself on the riches at Framingham's Danforth Museum of Art.

James Foritano