

The Boston Globe

What's up at Boston-area art galleries

Cate McQuaid, *Globe Correspondent*
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Stop by the exhibit "System: EConomies" and you'll be deluged with facts. The show, at Boston University's 808 Gallery, is the nucleus of "Alternative Visions: Sustainable Futures," a series of events and workshops fostering conversation about environmental sustainability — beekeeping, salt marsh seeding, and the ridiculous number of commonplace products made with petrochemicals. It is, almost necessarily, pedagogical.

But the show, put together by curators Lynne Cooney and Dana Clancy, overcomes the information overload with a genuine sense of fun. The exhibit brims with invitation and welcome. Most of the projects take a small-community, DIY approach, and promote the feeling that yes, we can make things better.

What we learn about bees: They link their legs in order to build honeycombs. That's called festooning. Maria Molteni and Colette Aliman's "Festooning: Inflatable Beehive," a giant, yellow-and-orange blow-up hive, is meant to create that spirit of cooperation and community among humans. Cartoonish and charming, it's probably 8 or 10 feet high. Step inside and it has the feeling of a sacred space: hexagonal, warmly illuminated, open at the top. The artists envision it as a meeting place.

Equipped with solar power, rainwater collection, and resources for growing food, Mary Mattingly's "Flock House" looks like a geodesic dome on wheels. She has made many, and moved some through city streets, to make points about sustainability and about human migration as part of world ecology. It doesn't look like easy living — the inside resembles a tree house — but it's nimble and smart. The salt marshes and mudflats surrounding Boston protect our shorelines. The artist collective Platform, founded by Jane D. Marsching and Andi Sutton, is working on a long-term project, "Marsh Radio Island," which involves nurturing local marshes and cultivating community.

Their plan: To make floating crochet forms planted with sea lavender and other marshy plants, and send them out into the shallows of Boston's flood-prone neighborhoods. They held a crocheting bee in the gallery, and created a sweet, lumpy, sprawling prototype.

Works such as these sidestep the risk, when it comes to activism, of being preachy about how we've already caused irreparable damage to the planet. Even Marina Zurkow's installation, "The Petroleum Manga," takes a light-hearted approach to a dark subject. Zurkow uses the clean-lined, cutesy style of manga comics to render objects made from petrochemicals. She papers three walls with images of such things as a water pistol, a plastic chicken, a balloon, a credit card. The manner of drawing evokes innocence — as do many of the objects she portrays — which plays cleverly against the poisonous threat that is her topic.



At Gallery NAGA, Gerry Bergstein's mixed media works "Theory and Practice."



At 808 Gallery's exhibition "System: EConomies," Mary Mattingly's "Flock House."

There are more events to come, including a hydrocarbon tasting event (yum!) with Zurkow and chef Lauryn Turell on March 22, an environmental activist potluck on March 28, and a handful of lectures. For more information, check www.bu.edu/cfa/sustainability.

Plotting painterly fiction

Boston painter Gerry Bergstein has returned to the sheer goopiness of paint after a diversion, in his last show, to more digital work. For his new exhibit, "Theory and Practice," at Gallery NAGA, digital prints are but one of the items in his toolkit, which includes trompe l'oeil, dried paint excavated from the gurney he uses as a palette, and figurines from model train dioramas.

As ever, Bergstein is trying to figure out the universe, and it's a massive, spinning, tricky place. He invokes great thinkers who have tackled life, the universe, art, and society, and suggests that nobody has quite put it all together yet.

In "Black Hole" he stacks Einstein, Freud, Steven Hawking, and more, each standing or seated atop the next like so many cheerleaders. At the pinnacle, Marx clings to a burgeoning bouquet of images from art history, popular culture, and the garden. The whole thing appears to be on paper taped to a blackboard, but that's paint, not tape — Bergstein uses trompe l'oeil to drive home the point that nothing is what it seems, that even the most comprehensive theories are merely phantasms.

In "Oversized Load, for Richard Serra," he turns what looks like a section of Serra's famously controversial "Tilted Arc" sculpture into a rusty toboggan on the back of a flatbed. Various art-historical nudes ride upon it, including Jacques-Louis David's portrayal of the murdered French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat, lolling out of his tub.

The truck careens through space that is half cosmic, half chalk marks on black paper, which appears to tear away to reveal a star-spattered blue sky beneath. Again, it's all tatty creation, somebody's ideas (or the culture's, or maybe it's just Bergstein's fever dream) scratched on black paper, here push-pinned to a more enormous and incomprehensible truth behind it. But, what do you know, that's just painterly fiction, too.

"Theory and Practice" utilizes old, peeled-off paint from his palette. It's more sculpture than painting. Layers of old paint project from the bottom of the piece like a colorful trash heap. An old paint tube sticks out of it. Two small men work to shovel it up, as behind them unfolds a picture of a boy with his back to us, regarding blossoms as big as he is. Maybe this is a self-portrait: Bergstein is both the boy, awed by the world's beauty, and the workmen, shoveling through the pretty, messy muck.

More information:

Theory and Practice

At: Gallery NAGA,

67 Newbury St., through March 23. 617-267-9060, <http://www.gallerynaga.com>



Maria Molteni and Colette Aliman's "Festooning: Inflatable Beehive."



Gerry Bergstein's "Black Hole."