

The DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park
51 Sandy Pond Road
Lincoln, Massachusetts

Through April 11

A DENSE WEB

The 2010 DeCordova Biennial

CONNECTICUT ARTIST WARD SHELLEY WANTS TO GIVE YOU A TOUR OF HIS BRAIN.

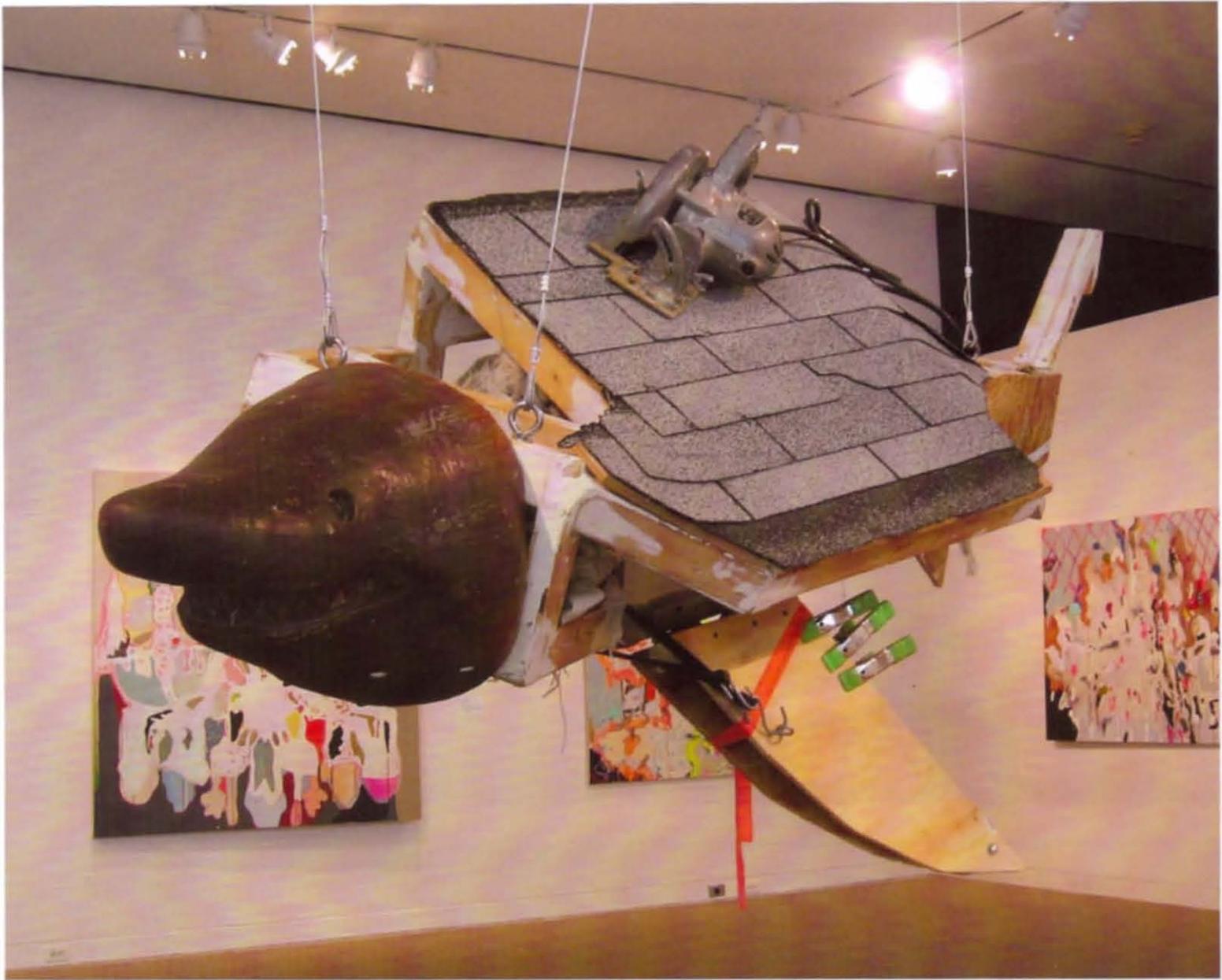


"Archive," his installation for the DeCordova Museum's inaugural Biennial, consists of a mountain of idiosyncratically labeled cardboard boxes, each one representing a whim or memory located somewhere in his cerebrum. Circuiting the floor-to-ceiling form while inspecting its contents not only concretizes the process of human recollection but also recapitulates the viewer's experience of the Biennial itself. Just as Shelley has aggregated desultory synaptic firings into a unified sculptural whole, so has the Biennial's curatorial team assembled a host of ostensibly disparate work from 17 New England artists into an impressively coherent exhibition. A dense web of thematic connections hangs between the art, from architecture and the construction of history to ecology and abstruse schematic systems.

Among the threads is a concern with archival practices that runs through not only Shelley's cardboard mountain but also Mark Tribe's ingenious installation "The Dystopia Files." Tribe, who teaches at Brown University, has transformed the DeCordova's photography study space into a simulated surveillance archive. From outside the unlit room, viewers witness video footage of conflicts between police and protesters rear-projected onto its closed frosted glass door. Before reading the curator's description, they hesitate to enter. In fact, I saw a man reprimand his daughter for trying. And this hesitation generates an aura of trespass around the work, one heightened by a motion-activated control system inside that unexpectedly stops the footage and turns on the lights.

The room's interior betrays 44 locked flat files (actually the DeCordova's photo collection), which Tribe has relabeled with the names of political art collectives and activist groups, giving viewers the sense of having infiltrated the secret archive of a hegemonic, Orwellian regime. Perhaps obviously, the installation comments on the revival of COINTELPRO-like federal surveillance practices in the U.S. following 9/11 and the Patriot Act. If you stand still long enough, however, more provocative interpretations emerge: the room darkens and the footage resumes (now mirrored in front projection) as you switch roles from threatened intruder to comfortable insider. Tribe gives you the opportunity to play both surveyor and surveyed, hinting at how the gap between the security culture of the state and its critics closes when the latter adopt what he calls "a defensive posture that mirrors the logic of the forces they seek to resist."

Unfortunately, not all the Biennial's work is as innovative as "The Dystopia Files." For a show that promises, in the words of Associate Curator of Contemporary Art Dina Deitsch, artists who are "forward thinking" and



LEFT PAGE: Greta Bank, *Biophilia Biophobia*, 2010, wood, foam, epoxy, sparkle flake, paint.
 ABOVE: Phil Lique, *American Dream*, 2008, resin, plywood, shingles, clamps, circular saw.

"exemplars of key contemporary art practices," the inclusion of Otto Piene and Paul Laffoley remains a mystery. The career of the German-born Piene (who now lives in Groton, Mass.) peaked back in 1972 when he was commissioned to deploy his helium-filled Sky Art sculptures at the Munich Olympic Games. For the Biennial, he dusted off his 1969 inflatable piece "Fleur du Mal," which looks like an out-of-place old timer amid work 40 years its junior. Meanwhile, the Boston-based Laffoley's arcane Kabbalistic diagrams, though completed more recently, find themselves in the same boat. They articulate an esoteric cosmological system Laffoley conceived in the '60s and '70s, and employ a style he began developing around the same time that draws heavily from the visual idiom of the New Age movement.

These curatorial oversights are easily forgotten in the envelope-pushing work of other Biennial exhibitors, most notably Phil Lique and Greta Bank. Lique, who hails from New Haven, Conn. takes the cake for the show's most visually arresting sculpture. His less-than-subtly titled "Shark: American Dream" consists of a cast resin shark head mounted onto a squaliform assemblage of

building site materials and tools: roof shingles, plywood, plastic fencing, even a circular saw. The curators rightly observe a "visual pun on predatory lending practices and the recent demise of the housing market," but judging from the consistent visual lexicon of home construction supplies and fierce animal imagery in Lique's other work, "Shark" also rethinks American Dream-chasing as a savage Darwinian struggle. Neither theme may be particularly original, but Lique's deft handling of materials is. Like Tara Donovan, he skillfully sculpts the quotidian, but whereas Donovan's alchemy completely defamiliarizes the original — transforming cups, for instance, into an icy landscape — Lique lays bare his materials' provenance, allowing their social and cultural resonance to reverberate through the work.

The Maine-based Bank's multi-piece installation "Biophilia Biophobia" is the Biennial's most conceptually fecund. "Stumpy" — an antique Victorian chair rendered both glimmering and grotesquely tumescent by a heavy application of foam, epoxy, sparkle flake and paint — is surrounded by a garden of gooey, glandular "Wallflowers." The work, whose unique aesthetic fuses Louise



Ward Shelley, *Archive*, 2010, cardboard boxes.

Barbara Owen

FROM THE STUDIO

MARCH 2-27, 2010



Manifest, oil on canvas, 66"x48", 2008

Colo Colo Gallery
 25 Centre Street
 New Bedford, MA 02740
 (508) 642-6026

Bourgeois-esque biomorphic creepiness with the chintzy glamour of glitter nail polish, alludes to Victorian sexual repression while offering a feminist critique of that era's affiliation of women with the delicacy of flowers. (Early metaphoric usage of "wallflower" referred to Victorian ladies who couldn't find dance partners.) At the same time, "Biophilia Biophobia" is curiously Japanese, both in the animism of its fungally metamorphosed chair and in the way its monstrous/precious dichotomy echoes the creepy/cute subset of Japan's kawaii culture (think Tokyo Kamen's monsters or Takashi Murakami's "Army of Mushrooms").

All told, the 2010 DeCordova Biennial provides an exhilarating and, with a few exceptions, accurate showcase of New England's ever-evolving artistic scene. The 1989-2009 annual shows were important yearly snapshots, but with this new format the museum has stepped up to the plate as the region's chief arbiter of developing artistic trends. Based on this inaugural grand slam, I think we can count on the DeCordova for authoritative curation and critical discourse in 2012 and beyond.

Mark Drummond Davis