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Visionary Arts museum returns to its inspired roots

By Edward Gunts
October 5, 2008



David Anson Russo created this large maze at AVAM. (Baltimore Sun photo by Lloyd Fox / October 1, 2008)

When the [American Visionary Art Museum](#) opened in 1995, founder and director Rebecca Hoffberger sought to provide a new kind of institution for Baltimore and beyond.

It was not meant to be a science center that focused solely on technological achievements or a gallery that promoted art with a capital A. The goal was to create a place that explored the connections between art and science and philosophy (and social responsibility) - and to see what happens from there.

An exhibit that opens this weekend shows how far the museum has come in the past 13 years. It also brings the museum back to its core mission of celebrating imagination, invention and vision.

The Marriage of Art, Science & Philosophy, which runs through Sept. 6, 2009, starts with the same premise as the museum itself: that the creative process behind art and the spark that leads to scientific innovation are one and the same.

Video

Its underlying message is that schools may teach students to memorize facts and pass tests, but it's the less-easily-quantifiable acts of "intuitive artistry" that make a difference in the world - and that those acts are more common than we may think.

"Conventional thinking is the ruin of our souls," Hoffberger says, quoting the Persian poet Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi. "We want to ignite in the viewer a sense of the possible."

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To make the point, Hoffberger, who served as the exhibit's curator, brought together more than 50 artists, scientists, philosophers and other deep thinkers, all of whom work in ways that blur the boundaries between art and science. It's a mix that only Hoffberger, with her breadth of interests and contacts, could have assembled.

We meet Douglas Zaruba of Panama, who says he travels back and forth through time and constructs "Dream Gate" cabinets to store three-dimensional "postcards from the road."

We meet Kenny Irwin Jr., a California resident (and grandson of former Colts owner Carroll Rosenbloom), who vividly remembers all the dreams he ever had - and documents them in drawings made with Bic ballpoint pens.

There's Rose Rushbrooke of Virginia, who makes fractal quilts with complex geometrical patterns; David Anson Russo, who flew in from California to paint a giant maze about the convergence of art and science in one night; the singer [Peggy Lee](#), whose sultry rendition of "Fever" accompanies an interactive "infrared family theater" that helps open the show, and Frank Calloway, a 112-year-old Alabama muralist who started drawing with crayons and colored markers when he was in his 80s and hasn't stopped since.

The exhibit also honors some old museum friends, including the late Gerald Hawkes, who fashioned exquisite human figures from matchsticks, and the late Hobart Brown, originator of the museum's annual Kinetic Sculpture Race (and who is represented here by his first kinetic sculpture, a sort of oversized red tricycle with training wheels, which Brown dubbed a "pentacycle").

In some ways, this exhibit can be seen as a compilation of AVAM's Greatest Hits, because the artists touch on many of the themes and topics the museum has investigated over the years.

In this case, there is a greater than usual emphasis on science (and science fiction) as subject matter for art and the role of the scientist as artist. We can marvel at [Jeff Smith's](#) wooden "Abacus," J.J. Cromer's toothsome drawings and Leo Sewell's "Slidescape," a minuscule city skyline fashioned entirely from old slide rules.

Some displays have a fantastical, Ripley's Believe It or Not quality to them, including Stephen Pratt's painted ant colony, Zaruba's pendulum that never stops swinging and the micro-alphabet that Dalton Ghetti carved on the tips of sharpened lead pencils. A

showstopper is Dr. Seth Goldstein's Cram Guy, the life-sized depiction of a nerdy, plaid-

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shirted college student pulling an all-nighter in front of the computer, as his cat plays with the computer's dangling "mouse."

Shortly before this exhibit opened, the museum received two prestigious honors. *Travel + Leisure* magazine ranked it No. 1 on its list of "10 Places to See Before You're 10," and the Washington-based [Arthur C. Clarke Foundation](#) gave the museum its first annual award for vision and imagination.

With its combination of playfulness, ingenuity and good humor, this exhibit shows why the museum receives such recognition. One lesson that comes out is that it's OK to be a geek - as long as you're building or promoting or obsessing over the right things. Call it geek chic. Another lesson is that it's OK to fail, as long as you don't give up. That could be the museum's motto.

At 56, Hoffberger says wistfully that this may be the last exhibit she curates by herself at the museum, because the next two will have a guest curator and she doesn't know what might happen after that.

If this really is going to be her last show, it's also one of her most inspiring. Like the artists whose work it brings to light, *Marriage* demonstrates that the museum has never given up on trying to improve the world by showing fresh ways to look at life and new paths to follow.

"The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind a faithful servant," [Albert Einstein](#) observes in one of the wall sayings. "We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift."

Everywhere, that is, except the American Visionary Art Museum.

If you go

The Marriage of Art, Science & Philosophy runs through Sept. 6, 2009, at the American Visionary Art Museum, 800 Key Highway. The museum is open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. Admission is \$12. Call 410-244-1900 or go to [avam.org](#).

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