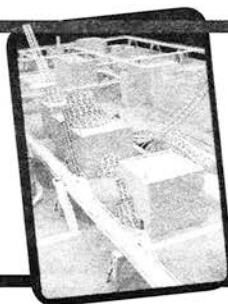


Art

 MUSEUM AND GALLERY LISTINGS START ON PAGE 35


UTOPIAN CITY?
The Kabakovs' "Center of Cosmic Energy" plays at inventing a new religion.

Locomotion commotion

Trains at the DeCordova, plus the Kabakovs' Utopia at Tufts

BY GREG COOK

"TRAINScape"

DeCORDOVA MUSEUM & SCULPTURE PARK | 51 SANDY POND ROAD, LINCOLN | THROUGH JANUARY 13

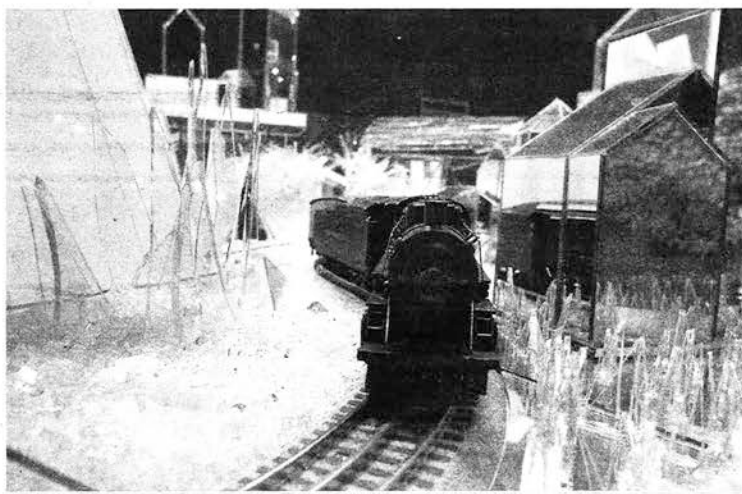
ILYA AND EMILIA KABAKOV, "THE CENTER OF COSMIC ENERGY"

TUFTS UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY | LOWER CAMPUS ROAD, MEDFORD | THROUGH NOVEMBER 11

The DeCordova Museum's "Trainscape: Installation Art for Model Railroads" is a great, wild, flawed 14-artist circus. Your first sights from the gallery entrance are dangling cartoon clouds, a giant gent in a stovepipe hat, mini mountains, cascading white buildings, pink petals floating in midair. There's lots of motion as four trains clickety-click out from the center of the room and circulate through 12 installations commissioned by curator Nick Capasso and company. My first reaction wasn't much different from that of the little girl I overheard exclaim, "This is awesome!"

A sculpture by Marshfield's George Greenamyers looms over you — and it seems innocent enough. A man rendered in a folksy style, in what looks like papier-mâché, with big gray sideburns and a black stovepipe hat and suit, sits at a table staring with big blank eyes at a cartoony sack of money. A toy freight train runs between his legs, underneath the table, past a sign that reads, "Cornelius Vanderbilt (1794-1877) Chief Rogue of the Railroad Robber Barons," before looping around and coming back again. Greenamyers paints quotations around the edge of the table: "You have undertaken to cheat me. I won't sue you, for the law is too slow. I will ruin you." And "What do I care about law? Ain't I got the power?" It's a blunt thwack, reminding us that trains ain't all fun and imagination, but also that tycoons had so much money and power that the world could be like a toy to them.

The train chugs on through Fitchburg couple Ellen Wetmore & Jeff "Jeffu" War-mouth's *Land o' Lactation*, winding across a causeway above a milky lake poured between realistically rendered mountains. The peaks, though, resemble breasts, with milky fluid trickling from their tips down to the lake below. The piece was inspired by the recent arrival of the couple's son. "Shortly after Alexander's birth," a wall text explains, "Wetmore remarked that her life was being taken over by her breasts." This affords satirist Warmouth, who is unable to



HERE, THERE, AND EVERYWHERE Joy Wulke's twinkling landscape recalls Superman's icy Fortress of Solitude.

resist a cheesy joke, fertile territory ("Mozzarella Mine: Danger Falling Cheese"). It's all too goofy to get me thinking deep thoughts about the nourishing earth, as another wall text suggests, but it does bring to mind the Grand Tetons in Wyoming, which some think were named by a French trapper who thought the peaks looked like a lady's, uh, tetons. You've got to hand it to the French; hereabouts people looked at mountains and saw only the profiles of old men.

Capasso in another wall text explains that the exhibition addresses the "vital issue" of contemporary artists inventing imaginary worlds and alternative realities — partly as an escape from our actual nervous world. It is a significant trend, but the explanation feels tacked on. The triumph of "Trainscape" is its entertaining playfulness. Some big ideas are batted about, with varying degrees of success, but the overriding spirit is fun. There are lots of groaner puns, maybe too many. Still, it's when the artists here get too earnest and arty that they falter. The contrast with the toy trains makes such attitudes feel particularly precious and pretentious.

The center of the exhibit, from which all the trains radiate out, is Somervillian Chris Frost's *Municipile*, a tower of white wooden models of local landmarks like South Station, Harvard's Memorial Hall, Cambridge City Hall, and the DeCordova. They look like

a bunch of birdhouses spun up by a tornado. One train leaves for *Inflatable Respiring Cloudscape*, by Providence's Robin Mandel and Gideon Webster. The engine snakes across a mirrored tabletop, triggering a blower to funnel air through silvery hoses to inflate cloth cartoon clouds. Another train weaves through *Here, There and Everywhere*, by Joy Wulke of Stony Creek, Connecticut. It's a twinkling landscape of abstract buildings, trees, and hills in glass and mirrors. Water bubbles in a pair of aquariums at one end. Jagged fields of glass jut upright dangerously. It recalls Superman's icy hideout, the Fortress of Solitude.

Also included: delicately jiggling pink lily pads by Doug Bosh of Providence, light-up Buddhas by Sandor Bobo of Providence, an illustration of a Wallace Stevens poem by Ralph Helmick of Newton, philosophy puns by Mike Newby of South Chatham, a giant blinking circuit board by Edythe Wright of Roslindale, and a pile of ceramic pots and shards by Ahmed Abdalla of Somerville.

➤ "The Center of Cosmic Energy," which Ilya and Emilia Kabakov have constructed at Tufts University Art Gallery, purports to get you in touch with cosmic energy with the help of giant ancient underground artifacts. (Be warned: spoilers ahead.) The Center is part of the Russian couple's proposed *Utopian City*, a model of which is

pictured in the first gallery. It looks like a factory combined with electric plant cooling towers and the skeleton of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Signs in the next gallery explain how "throne-shaped" sites channel cosmic energy, particularly when they have a 60-degree tilt. A pair of monitors show cosmic-energy sites: the Egyptian pyramids, Angkor Wat, European cathedrals, Stonehenge, Macchu Picchu, earth-art works like Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*, and the wreckage of the World Trade Center.

Next is a dimly lit mini amphitheater, with wooden benches ringing the walls. What appears to be a giant clay nipple rests in a bin on the floor. Light shines from two concentric circles on the ceiling above, with metal poles hanging down so that it resembles the bottom of a spaceship with speed lines. A recorded voice — one of those official-sounding museum recordings, or maybe someone from an infomercial — tells us that ancient artifacts were found buried on the property and that researchers believe they were designed to collect cosmic energy.

The room gets progressively lighter as the recorded spiel goes on, until it's sunny bright and the voice concludes, "The Communication with the Cosmos building, in which you are now sitting, has been constructed upon the actual archaeological site in Medford where the 'arched antennae' and the 'reservoirs' were found. Sitting within this structure, your intuition of 60 degrees' has been activated and you most likely feel a surge of cosmic energy flowing throughout your body." And I did feel a little tingle.

Out the back and down the stairs, you enter what appears to be an excavation. At the end of a dirt-filled room stands a giant mushroom-looking thing, apparently made from clay, rising from floor to ceiling. The monumental brass of Richard Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra* started up in my head. It was all cosmic and kind of silly, like the black-monolith thingy in the film 2001: A Space Odyssey.

The installation seems oddly vacant and somewhat tedious. Which feels both spot-on and kind of tedious. With all their make-believe, the Kabakovs are playing at inventing a new religion here. And as with many religions, they aim to ease our doubts with important-looking architecture and signs. The design evokes the future circa 1969, the year 2001: A Space Odyssey came out.

Signs at the end of the exhibit explain that Ilya Kabakov has shifted his focus from dystopias to utopian dreaming. But I wonder whether his subject hasn't shifted from the demise of the Russian Revolution's utopian dreams to America's space-age utopian capitalist dreams. These seemed triumphant in the 1990s, but since 2001 they appear to not be doing so well. ☉

FOR A SLIDE SHOW OF IMAGES FROM "TRAINScape," GO TO WWW.THEPHOENIX.COM/ARTS.