



By Stevenson Swanson | February 19, 2011

The Neighborhood Files, Arts

Curiouser and Curiouser: Exploring New Art

Pelham Art Center's current exhibit, "Curious Exploration," features a variety of playful and thought-provoking new-media art.



If winter has made you cranky, the current exhibit at the Pelham Art Center offers some light-hearted relief.

“Curious Exploration” brings together 10 playful and thought-provoking works by a half-dozen artists who work in a variety of forms that fall under the umbrella of new-media art.

That term encompasses digital media, electrical objects, mechanical pieces and, especially, video works, which take up most of the center’s larger rear

gallery.

I particularly enjoyed Lien-Chen Lin’s “Dinner for One,” a 2008 video shot in a Berlin apartment that owes some of its quirky charm to the spirit of silent movies. With no spoken dialog, an unseen character named Miss Sophie makes her wishes known to her servant James by spelling out her requests for soup and sherry with alphabet noodles, which appear one by one in a bowl of soup.

The camera pans away from the bowl to focus on various objects in the apartment or the view out the window, while James’ responses appear as captions on the screen. Miss Sophie seems to lead a rich fantasy life. She’s convinced that a cast of characters have gathered to spend the evening with her, among them “Sir Toby,” “Admiral von Schneider,” and “my very dear Mr. Winterbottom.”

After a while, you begin to sympathize with the long-suffering James.

Some of the pieces have an interactive component, although you may not realize it at first.

Scott Fitzgerald’s “Rift” looks like a simple projection of a city skyline on the gallery wall until you step in front of it. Suddenly, a stylized, metallic human figure is superimposed on the skyline. As its gestures start to bear an eerie resemblance to your own, you realize that your movements are being caught on a camera mounted above the projection. It’s a chance to create your own kaleidoscopic whirl of patterns and images.

The front gallery is devoted to works by Arthur Ganson, who creates kinetic sculptures that harken back to an earlier, mechanical age.

In “Margot’s Last Cat,” a metal plate mounted on a wheeled platform moves back and forth while a dollhouse chair attached to a counterweight bobs up and down, occasionally touching the platform. The wild card in this entrancing work is a small cat figurine that is attached to the platform. If the chair happens to hit the cat as it touches down, it spins wildly into the air until it falls slowly back toward the moving platform.

Even more arresting is Ganson’s “Machine with 11 Scraps of Paper.” Like an old-fashioned factory whose machines were driven by elaborate, interconnected systems of cogs and belts, “Machine” uses a single motor to slowly raise and lower the ends of 11 pieces of torn white paper.

The effect is like watching a squadron of graceful gulls in flight.

Whether you lean down to see how the wheels and wires are interconnected or stand back to watch the gently flapping paper, the effect is mesmerizing. I managed to forget, at least for a moment, that the car was at the mechanic’s and my home office was awash with unfiled paperwork.

For sheer whimsy married to digital technology, it’s impossible to resist “Duck: For a Good Time Call . . . ,” which features a smooth duck-shaped piece of wood sitting on a shelf.

After you dial a number listed in the full title of the piece, you hear a cell phone ringing beneath the shelf; the ringtone is a cheerful steel-drum tune. When the call goes to the phone’s voice-mail, a metal rod with a fabric-covered ball on the end snaps and delivers a swift quick to the duck’s rear end.

I’d give you the number, but you’ll have to go see it for yourself.

“Curious Exploration” is at the Pelham Art Center until April 2. Admission is free. For more information, call 914-738-2525 or go to www.pelhamartcenter.org