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‘Thinking Out of the Box’: Cardboard or art?

By Mary Gow

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“Why are you sitting in a box,” a voice asks a long eared rabbit sitting in a rectangle on the opening page of Antoinette Portis’s 2006 children’s book.

“It’s not a box,” the rabbit replies.

The rectangle is transformed, with the rabbit’s imagination and a few red lines, into a race car and, through the pages, into a rocket ship, a building, a mountain and more.

Portis’s book, “Not a Box,” sits by the entrance to Studio Place Arts, connecting to the new exhibit there — “Thinking Out of the Box.” Featuring art made from cardboard, this exhibit shows how boundless this common medium can be in the hands of artists.

With an opening reception at SPA this Friday, Jan. 25, “Thinking Out of the Box” continues until Feb. 23. At the opening and several times during the month, the exhibit also features performances by Ben Matchstick with the “Randomizojustificator,” a fantastic interactive sculpture installation. Two other exhibits, “Winter: 20 Years of Collaged Postcards” by Beth Brandt and “Accidental Abstracts” by Michael Lew-Smith are presented in SPA’s second and third floor galleries.

“‘Thinking Out of the Box’ is an exhibit that allows artists to explore cardboard,” said Sue Higby, executive director of SPA. “Why Cardboard? Cardboard would not be an artistic medium

you would see in a commercial gallery, but at the same time cardboard has so many different qualities that are beautiful and have such versatility — and it is also so readily available. It makes for a perfect artistic medium in many ways.”

“Cardboard is sort of the every person’s medium. It’s like comfort food, like pulling on your favorite flannel shirt with the hole in the elbow. Cardboard is so known and familiar, I think people really enjoy the challenge and excitement of finding a way to work with it,” she said.

“As visitors view the show, they see that cardboard that has been stitched with a sewing machine, been sliced carefully with X-Acto blades, been stacked, been submerged in water and reshaped. It’s been fastened with brass fasteners and staples. The versatility factor is actually part of the unique quality of looking at each piece.”

From the street, viewers get an introduction to creative approaches to the media with “Pilot,” by Montpelier sculptor Mark Lorah. In SPA’s front window, “Pilot” is made of new cardboard boxes. Stacked vertically and arched, they form a keyhole-like tower — an open keyhole to peer through into the gallery.

Janet van Fleet’s installation, “The Fierce Urgency of Now,” is an especially timely piece. It was already in the show before President Obama’s inaugural reference to the Martin Luther King Jr. quote that gives the work its title. The installation features four large cardboard panels. Faces of diversity look out — young, old, men, women, children, people of many races. Carrying through the panels are excerpts from King’s speeches.

Emiko Sawaragi Gilbert of Plainfield used cardboard from the bottom of boxes that carried beer bottles for two pieces. The bottles made gentle circular indentations in the corrugated material. Sawaragi Gilbert then applied graphite over one set of the cardboard panels for “Alchemy (Black)”; for “Alchemy (White)” she incorporated white wax pastel.

“It’s sort of a history of human use of cardboard,” said Higby “It’s like a tombstone etching on some level.”

B. Amore of Castleton uses “streetmade paper” in her “Manhattan Map.” This found paper may be torn, dirty, embedded with things. She coats it with resin to preserve it and then incorporates other pieces with it — in this piece, gloves and wire with the taped cardboard.

The mountain-like cardboard construction by Ben Matchstick of Montpelier, the “Randomizojustificator,” incorporates a maze of tunnels and paths, witty and thought provoking details, and justifications.

“It started as a machine, then became more of a sculpture, then became a heap. And I said, ‘Why is it becoming a heap?’ And I said, ‘Well – I don’t need to justify it any more because it’s the “Randomizojustificator,”’” said Matchstick.

Indeed, the “Randomizojustificator,” provides justifications. In red block letters on cardboard are justifications — “little green men,” “academnesia,” “duh,” and more. Through interaction with

the “Randomizojustificator,” as marbles roll through pages of the Random House Dictionary and past vintage pictures of burlesque and sideshow entertainers, justifications are discovered.

SPA’s second floor gallery features collages postcards by Beth Brandt of Jericho. Brandt has been making “Winter” postcards since 1991 since 1991. Each year she composes a new design; she cuts, tears, stamps the individual elements onto each one, then mails them to friends. For “Winter” she recollected them from friends to temporarily assemble together,

Michael Lew-Smith’s “Accidental Abstracts,” on SPA’s third floor, are photographs of intricate designs in the weathered paint of old cars, trucks and tractors found throughout Vermont. Sunlight, vegetation, and age transform old car paint. Lew-Smith’s close up look reveals unexpected patterns and beauty.

Studio Place Arts

Studio Place Arts presents “Thinking Out of the Box,” art made from cardboard, through Feb. 23, at SPA, 201 N. Main St. in Barre. In the Second Floor Gallery are “Winter: 20 Years of Collaged Postcards” by Beth Barndt Jan. 22– Feb. 6; “Inspiration: by Dennis Hedding Feb. 8– 23; in the Third Floor Gallery, “Accidental Abstracts” by Michael Lew-Smith through Feb. 23. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; noon to 4 p.m. Saturday; call 479-7069, or go online to www.studioplacearts.com. A public reception will be held Friday, Jan. 25, 5 to 7 p.m.; a closing reception Saturday, Feb. 23, 3:30 to 5 p.m.