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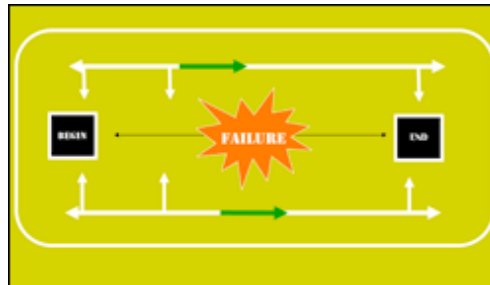
**Going with the flow charts**  
**The DeCordova's Annual Exhibition hits the mark, and so does Bruce Bemis at the BCA**  
 BY CHRISTOPHER MILLIS

**The 2005 DeCordova Annual Exhibition**  
 At DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, 51 Sandy Pond Road, Lincoln, through July 31.

**"Bruce Bemis: Reciprocal Illumination"**  
 At Mills Gallery, Boston Center for the Arts, 539 Tremont Street, Boston, through June 5.

Whatever you may think of the DeCordova Museum's Annual Exhibition — feelings tend to run high and not just because some years are better than others — this yearly group exhibit of New England artists has established itself as one of the most important events of its kind. For starters, there's the exhaustive work that goes into the selection of the participants. (The review of untold hundreds of packets of unsolicited materials is merely the start; the curators comb studios as well as art schools, galleries, and museums.) The Annual is also theme-free, so the curators' sole obligation is to quality. Combine that with the number of talented artists in the six New England states and you get a frequently exciting and invariably ambitious show. As it happens, this is a vintage year.

By far the most forceful and hilarious work belongs to Michael Lewy. For his inkjet digital designs, he takes the banal images of the graphs and charts associated with corporate presentations and, through ever so slight modifications, transforms them into resonant conceptual poems. No small trick. As George Fifiield writes pithily in the catalogue, "Michael Lewy seeks to quantify the ineffable by using Microsoft's PowerPoint software. . . ." Could an artistic mission be any clearer?



*'FAILURE':* Michael Lewy's PowerPoint graphs are not only funny but also weirdly mesmerizing.



*RIFT:* Sally Moore's hanging sculptures register like biospheres.

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In one chart (they're simply numbered), three purple rectangles hover in make-believe, three-dimensional space above a vast grid of green rectangles of the same size. If you look closely, you can make out a tiny legend; with the same dry exactitude as you'd find in a year-end report, a pair of color-coded squares indicate that green signifies "desire," purple "fulfillment." That makes the hackneyed graphic something you've never seen before: an illustration of human unhappiness.

This sort of double take, in which the familiar and impersonal snaps into the poignant, strange, and delightful, happens often. The various columns of a nondescript bar graph at first appear random and all one billious color. In fact, the columns are paired, and in each pair, one column enjoys a slightly different shade of sickening green. The legend below explains the minuscule difference: one green indicates "enthusiasm," the other "false enthusiasm." The result isn't just funny, it's also weirdly mesmerizing. What is "false enthusiasm?"

Lewy avoids mere cleverness, and though his imagery is standard-issue and his language abrupt, the presentation charts never feel like one-liners. Rather, they invite you back to puzzle over their obvious simplicity and unexpected wit. I've been returning to the images not for their visual appeal so much as for their conceptual allure. These are both puzzles and solutions to puzzles, presentations and inquiries. If false enthusiasm is barely distinguishable from the real thing, what sense do we make of what thrills us? If fulfillment can occupy only a fraction of the continent of desire, where should we look for it?

In another rectangular illustration, this one a flow chart, arrows point to and emanate from three words. Halfway between "beginning" on the left and "end" on the right appears "failure" — not in a neat square box like "beginning" and "end" but in a spiky orange shape that suggests both fire and thorns. The effect is reassuring, even to the point of joyousness, as if to say that failure is required for arriving anywhere and that, unlike starts and finishes, it's never static and always central. Lewy's PowerPoint charts are momentary prayers, small epiphanies of understanding and hope.

Sally Moore makes complex, miniature, zany hanging sculptures that register like biospheres. Her materials either come from the natural world or look as if they had. She relies on wood, cotton, and metal, and her constructions engage with their interest in the hidden, the interior, the subterranean.

With their dollhouse-sized ladders and bridges, staircases and trees, Moore's diagrams are



'RECIPROCAL ILLUMINATION': Bruce Bemis's installation has transformed the Mills Gallery.

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with their dollhouse-sized ladders and bridges, staircases and trees, Moore's dioramas are worlds where nothing makes sense and everything harmonizes. In almost every piece, an object looms below the surface on which the primary activities take place. In *Drought*, a luminous crystal ball like a droplet of water hangs on a wire far beneath a field of thorns. In *Persephone*, we see both the topsoil on which a single tree grows and the topsoil's underside, a roof of broken glass. In *Rift*, a thimble-sized wire mesh basket descends into the space beneath the scrambled goings-on like a guest sneaking out of a noisy party. You're made to feel as if you were seeing past the apparent and into the unknown.

Nadya Volicer's *Home Spun* is both more abstract and more physical. At the top of the DeCordova's third-floor landing, she's built a room from recycled scraps of painted and unpainted plywood. Not only do the thousands of oddly shaped wood shards fit together like an immense puzzle, but Volicer has orchestrated the pieces so they appear to be churning — it wouldn't be surprising to hear an engine engage and the room begin to spin. The floor pieces are the largest; as floor becomes wall, the scraps thin out and sharpen, as though the room were stretching to create itself. By the time the roof is under way, the scraps have shrunk in size and diminished in color but also thickened. And you've realized that *Home Spun* is a comment on the meaning of a floor and a wall and a roof: the floor supports, the walls climb, the roof protects.

Milan Klic's "vehicles" of bamboo and cotton are as wispy as bird skeletons and as enchanting as hot-air balloons. His constructions — none of them moves, even though the multiple wheels and frail carriages suggest transport — are like fanciful sketches for rickshaws that can never be. Close to weightless and almost flat, they rise to six or seven or eight feet, part ghost, part perambulator. Barbara Takenaga paints colorful acrylic constellations that appear to be populated by iridescent sea urchins. Some areas recede, others swirl forward in delicate, organized patterns, a cross between flower arrangements and the night sky. Lalla A. Essaydi's similarly choreographed photographs of women in white garments covered by Arabic calligraphy court issues of political and social import. Jean Blackburn likes to take the stuff of living rooms — sofas, chairs, area rugs — apart and reconstruct them. In *Template*, a large blue rocking chair with rungs and arms and parts of its seat missing is positioned beside a child-sized rocker made from the missing wood. It reads like a warning about parenting. Laurie Sloan's whimsical and intelligent cut-paper constructions, Nao Tomii's little metallic creatures (they look as if they'd been birthed in a *Star Trek* episode), and Mark Wethli's good-natured, colorful acrylic circles painted onto the 41-foot-tall wall at the foot of the DeCordova's staircase complete the show.

**AT THE BOSTON CENTER FOR THE ARTS' MILLS GALLERY**, Bruce Bemis's majestic and sensual installation "Reciprocal Illumination" is a reminder of the poetic potential of video. On entering the gallery, you hear the sound of the ocean accompanying a hazy rising and falling of foamy, celery-green waves on the first screen. Eventually, the swirling abstraction gives birth to the black, rubber-clad upper body of a surfer whom you see from behind. Another wave rises; the surfer disappears and then reappears as the wave subsides. The camera is close to both water and man; you're out with him in the surf, taking in the sea. Beyond the screen, the cavernous space of the gallery is almost empty and yet feels fully occupied, since the walls and the ceiling are alive with rippling patterns of shadow and light. An examination of the two video projectors on the floor and the giant glass Christmas ornaments beside them that have been made the projectors' screens reveals footage of an incoming tide. By using bright glass balls as the surface of his two videos, Bemis remakes the ebb and flow of the ocean into a light show of unpredictable shapes. You won't want to leave.

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