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ART REVIEW; A Show With a Good Sense of Humor

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THERE is a school of thought, and I'm enrolled in it, which says that juried shows make disappointing viewing. Well, make this an exception, for the exhibition of artists from the International Sculpture Center at Grounds for Sculpture goes off like a Roman candle.

Founded in 1960, the center is a nonprofit organization that works to advance the creation and display of contemporary sculpture. As the world's leading sculpture organization, it has members in over a dozen countries.

Part of the success of a juried show is in picking the judges. The panel here -- the artist Helen Escobedo, the curator Steve Nash, who is now director of the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, and the art critic Carter Ratcliff -- was an excellent choice, for together the members have made an eccentric if amiable selection of 56 works, from 1000 entries, that combines the well-made and the whimsical. This show should please all.

The sculptures have been installed throughout the museum and the nearby Domestic Arts Building. It is a nice fit; each of the works has ample room to breath. They have also been grouped roughly according to shape and size, which makes for some interesting juxtapositions.

What is really cool about this show is that many of the artists are new, or at least not part of the usual tribe of exhibitors inhabiting New York galleries. Nor have their spirits been deadened by age. The stuff on show here is fresh, and for the most part of a very high caliber.

Most of the large, formal sculptures are in the museum. Here you'll find Foon Sham's seductive biomorphic form made from hundreds of carefully calibrated pieces of wood. It looks like a plaster cast of a human knee and shin, or perhaps the skin shed from the body of a monumental snake. Either way, it is fascinating.

Nearby, hovering vertiginously, is Henry B. Richardson's dizzyingly luminous globe made from pieces of flat, chiseled glass. The dangerous physicality of the object is alluring, as is its near-perfect symmetry. Gaps in the glass reveal a hollow interior, which, if you look inside, has a slightly terrifying effect; it's like being stuck inside a mirror ball.

Equally spooky, if less loveable, is Ross Bell's "Premium Carpet Strip" (2000), one of the weirdest pieces here. It consists of a largish wooden box inside of which is plush red carpet and walls studded with sharp nail ends. It is like being underneath the carpet you are standing on, or inside the mouth of some terrifying new species of piranha.

Mr. Bell, from Toronto, is one of four Canadians in the show. All are presenting very strong work, including, to pick just one example, a beautifully finished stained cherry wood

spiral by Shayne Dark. It rests in a cozy nook at the back of the museum. Oozing aplomb, it is quite sure of its great figure and shapely curves.

Other works employ materials with a history of social use. Kathleen Schneider uses plastic carry bags to create a delicate, colorful teepee, while Drew Goerlitz wedges paper sheets between the steel jaws of an industrial clamp. Neither idea is new, although in an era of wholesale appropriation in art this hardly matters. Artists are free to borrow at will.

The Domestic Arts Building, which is also the visitors center, is not an ideal setting for sculpture, although it happily accommodates the rest of the show.

There is plenty to enjoy here, including Helen Lessick's "Yeast (House of Manna)" (2002), a baby-sized loaf of bread baked inside a handmade paper house. Or is it all a clever trick, for there is no evidence of heat or moist dough on the paper, which is perfectly white? But then again, how did she get the bulbous chunk of baked bread (bearing a startling resemblance to the male scrotum) to come out the front door? I really don't know.

In general, the works here are more quirky and whimsical. They range from Abigail Newbold's creepy felt hands reaching out, seemingly, from within a white wall, to Lucy Norman Spencer's odd little object made of salt, paraffin and earth. This is humble work, but beneath that humility lays a percolating creative intelligence.

Good vibes also emanate from Michael D. Hansel's recreation in painted steel of a male balding pattern. You can't help but laugh at the sight of a few thinning, if grossly oversized hair follicles protruding from the smooth surface of an imaginary skull. It's silly, I know, but sometimes it's good to indulge in art that has a mildly aimless air. It's called having fun.

"ISC@GFS, 2003 International Exhibition" is at Grounds for Sculpture, 18 Fairgrounds Road, Hamilton, through Sept. 28. Information: (609) 586-0616.