

# Maine People

Sunday Sentinel **B**

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## According to Boyle

Gerry Boyle

## Waterville should be open to art

One recent morning, Marjan Laaper drove into downtown Skowhegan in the dead of night, set up a camera, and from 3 a.m. to 3 p.m. shot a time-lapse film of a fallout-shelter sign.

The idea, Laaper said, was to show something very horrible in a beautiful, changing light. An artist from Amsterdam (Holland, not New York), Laaper, 26, tried to explain this to the people who, once it got light, kept stopping to ask what she was doing.

"Whole families with children," Laaper said, smiling at her computer in a studio at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

"And what did they think?"

"Some people thought it was very nice because something was happening in their town," she said.

But, of course, some people didn't know what to think, and it wasn't as though Laaper, who is 26 and has had shows in prestigious places in The Hague and Rotterdam and Gouda (of cheese fame), could easily explain.

This, after all, is art, which often loses something in the telling. The best art can be like a funny story that falls flat: You had to be there.

Which is the way I felt last week. I had to be in a place where art isn't a dirty word and sculptors aren't dismissed as crackpots or charlatans.

So off I went, up Route 201 all the way to East Madison, and up the camp road to the art school, where the studios are lined up like chicken barns and gifted artists like Laaper — fewer than 10 percent of applicants to the Skowhegan school are accepted — tried to explain what they do and why.

A blonde wearing black, Laaper didn't have the fallout film developed, but she did have other things to show and tell.

Sitting at a Power Mac, she ran a clip that showed these two hands from two different people held about a quarter-inch apart — for hours. She said it made her think of the space that exists between people.

And then there was Laaper's video tape of an image reflected on an actual soap bubble, something that she wants to use in an exhibit that will incorporate a bubble machine, a la Lawrence Welk.

"I want it to make a new bubble every 15 seconds," Laaper said.

Which isn't as easy as it sounds, so I left her to tinker and continued on, sitting down outside with a fellow named Robert Liebner, who lives on Peaks Island in Casco Bay and once did an "installation" in an abandoned gun emplacement there.

Liebner, a thin, very pleasant fellow, talked about his work, which has this recurring theme of people being shaped and swept along by circumstances.

"The best way to give you the big picture is like Jonah and the Whale, the individual trapped in the belly of the beast," Liebner said.

A computer designer in his other life, he said he's doing an installation in Portland soon.

The inspiration for that work came when Liebner came across an empty attic that housed departing Civil War soldiers in a building on Congress Street. The work will include what appears to be Civil War tents, lighted in a darkened space, with a string quartet playing music composed for the event.

There was more from Liebner — he's one of nine Skowhegan artists preparing a show using the collections of the L.C. Bates Museum in Hinckley — but there were other artists, too, puttering away in their respective spaces.

Todd Weissner, a painter doing works inspired by science fiction, sort of, but also having to do with the idea of profanity, he said. Weissner, who is 22 and just got his undergraduate degree from Rutgers, said he'd been subsisting on ice tea and vitamins, painting non-stop along with his studio neighbor, Brett Cook-Dizney, a New York spray painter with a palette made up entirely of Krylon cans.

Cook-Dizney is commissioned to do huge outdoor murals on city

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Videostill: "We will meet again" by Dutch artist Marjan Laaper

## • Boyle

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walls: spray-painted portraits of people on a city block, portraits fronted by collections of the belongings of the people he paints.

A big man who wears his dreadlocks pulled back, Cook-Dizney, 29, recently went to Brazil, to a bleak suburb south of Rio de Janeiro, where he and other artists did a mural on the wall of a school.

The whole town turned out to watch, he said, and when the Brazilians realized the portraits championed their plight, they were so moved, they stood there on the street and cried.

Which I hope the people of Waterville don't do when Cook-Dizney brings his work to Waterville next week, in the form of a series of panels on the subject of Wal-Mart to be exhibited at Railroad Square.

Because people have been crying a lot about art in Waterville lately, and, frankly, I went to East Madison for an antidote to this anti-art whining.

In Waterville, the art in question,

of course, is a sculpture soon to be finished by a sculptor named Roger Majorowicz, who lives in North Whitefield and went to the Skowhegan school years ago.

The issue is purported to be the sculpture itself (some people say the stainless steel piece is going to be ugly) or it's purported to be money (the work was commissioned for the sum of \$80,000). But I'm afraid the underlying sourness is really about art in general, and the saddest thing is that so many people around here don't think their community deserves to have any.

Suddenly budget-conscious, people have marched (sort of) on City Hall to protest this sculptural spending spree. Suddenly civic-minded, they've asked why they weren't included in the process, when invitations to join in were issued ad nauseum. Suddenly art critics, they say it's the sculpture itself.

In fact, it's a serious lack of self-esteem.

For some reason, people around

here think art is a luxury, that sculpture is something you drive someplace else to see. Art isn't for economically beleaguered Central Maine; heck, we could use that money to buy three pickup trucks for public works. Besides, the money comes from Wal-Mart taxes, which were supposed to go to economic development, an area in which we are somewhat lacking.

And will continue to lack, as long as we think small and cheap.

There are times to be timid and there are times to be bold, and this is a time for some vision and even a little courage, I think.

So I say, put the thing up. Light it. Sell souvenirs and popcorn all around it.

If we don't strut our stuff, nobody else will. If we roll over and play dead, that's exactly what we'll be, with \$80,000 to spend to board up the storefronts.