

SMORGASBORD

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

LOCALLY GROWN

ALBANY INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT,
THROUGH SEPT. 7

OVER THE COURSE OF THE PAST 10 years, the airport's Art & Culture Program has served as a launching pad for regional artists and presented thematic exhibitions that have given travelers something to look forward to en route (a rarity in these days of airline industry dysfunction). We are lucky: Other airports have culture programs, but few have large dedicated gallery spaces like Albany's. *Locally Grown* is an enjoyable anniversary celebration of the program's achievements curated by director Sharon Bates, who has been at the helm since its founding.

Locally Grown perhaps wisely doesn't attempt to play identity politics or exhume local history (on lower levels in the airport, you'll find displays of local interest). Instead, *Locally Grown* imagines a locality engaged in creating a new story for itself through art; many of the artists in this exhibit envision alternate or interior worlds. And all of them share an infectious enthusiasm for creativity.

Locally Grown is a showcase for familiar names, with Michael Oatman, Harold Lohner, Larry Kagan, and Karin Stack among the usual suspects. All of these artists have previously had work in the airport gallery (many were in the 2007 Mohawk-Hudson Regional hosted there). It is a successfully balanced grouping, however, and the "something for everyone" principle applies—with 22 artists, each with a few pieces, every visitor is bound to find work that speaks to them.

Two sisters I met the day of my visit picked Devorah Sperber's *After Grant Wood (American Gothic) 2* (2006) as their favorite piece. It certainly would take the prize for "cleverest ocular trick" (despite stiff competition from Kagan and others). Indeed, curator Bates seems to have a soft spot for visual sleights of hand (*Now You See It* in 2004-05 featured art and ephemera about magic). *After Grant Wood* appears to be an arrangement of spools of thread in a pretty, graded color scheme. But it's magic: When you look at a small, clear sphere placed on a pedestal in front of the hanging,

you see *American Gothic*.

With more of the now-you-see-it, now-you-don't trickery are Kagan's *Poodle and Mosquito 1* (2004): abstract, tangled steel sculptures hung so that, when illuminated, they create shadow impressions of the eponymous creatures on the wall. Oatman's *Flying Carpet: Kilim* (2005) is a similarly clever collage of illustrated military planes and tanks in the pattern of a Islamic prayer rug. While tricking the eye is a theme, other artworks impress with the painstaking effort that went into them, such as Terry Conrad's intimate collages, made out of tiny colored cuttings, and Anima Katz's loving homages (her folksy-cartoony *Frida Kahlo in Her Art* and *Degas With His Paintings* (2007) are composed with dense brushstrokes).

Weaknesses in the show were predictable videos by Karin Stack and Torrance Fish, and the lack of breathing space for Edward Mayer's interestingly curved sculpture *Seventy-Eight* (2004), made out of tomato cages.

Locally Grown indulges in a good deal of

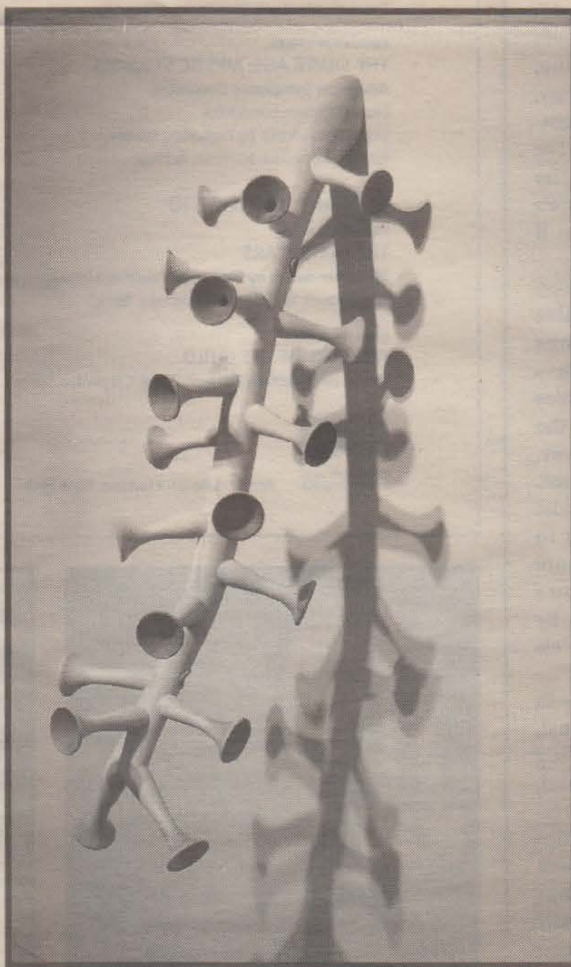
sugary whimsy, which works as a nice contrast to the no-nonsense airport setting (but might seem trite elsewhere). The playfulness begins on the main stairwell, where Ginger Ertz's *Soft Chandelier* (2007) hangs, crocheted out of pipe cleaners (installed for last year's regional) and continues with John Hanson's images of tiaras painted on old starched nurses' caps. Other works in the realm of the ornamental include Gina Occhiogrosso's birthday-cake-frosting paintings and Portia Munson's flower mandalas.

The best works create a sense of tension underneath the whimsy. Karin Stack's color photographs (which hang next to Laura Von Rosk's fantasy landscape oils to good effect) induce a telling double vision. Her cutesy scenes, like eerie glimpses of Smurfland, reveal the hyperreal superficiality of toy birds and staged lighting. And, while they make a soft-focus first impression, on further examination, painter Deborah Zlotzky's sublimely bizarre forms (with titles like *Phoam* and *Squalp*) appear to be studies of flowers with intricately twisting, organ-like protrusions; or maybe the naughty bits of elves. These artists keep you guessing.

In contrast to the fantasists here, a more direct, if less thematically developed, aesthetic was apparent in other works: Scott

Brodie's still-lives (a hat, a pair of shoes); Allen Grindle's black-and-white prints of lone figures; and George Simmons' spontaneously dynamic collages. The two portraitists—Lohner and John Hampshire—and the sculptor Paul Mauren provide a much-welcome counterpoint of human depth. While Lohner uses a layering process with monoprint to build complex, likeable characters, Hampshire gives us direct, even confrontational, portraits. *Labyrinth 124: John in Front of Wall Drawing at Jack Shainman* (2005) presents a dramatic perspective of a man's head and shoulders, seen through a maze of whorls (drawn with a Sharpie pen) that create areas of density or openness. Another surprisingly human figure, gangly yet elegant, is Mauren's abstract steel and ceramic *Cut and Paste* (2008); and Jude Lewis' wood sculpture (*I did, I will, I can't*) *Take a Chance* (2005) invites the viewer in through Seuss-like portholes or tubes.

Here, visitors will find they are welcomed into the world of art through a sense of play. With food for thought on themes political, meditative, and magical, this exhibit makes clear that the arts in the Capital Region and the Hudson Valley are thriving. ■



Playful: Lewis' (*I did, I will, I can't*) *Take a Chance* (2005).