



Danforth Museum hosts intriguing high-tech exhibits

By Chris Bergeron/Daily News staff

GHS

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FRAMINGHAM — As if torn between fear and hope, a human figure fashioned from wire peeks around a corner into a gallery where biology, technology and imagination intermingle in a fun, fascinating exhibit at the Danforth Museum of Art.

His apparent descendants crawl, learn to walk upright, stride about and ponder glowing computer screens that seem to display their evolution in "Smarter/Faster/Higher," an intriguing work of art created by Elizabeth Keithline in collaboration with her husband, Jeff.

Displayed as part of the 2011 Boston Cyberarts Festival, the installation of mixed media sculpture enacts the sort of open-to-interpretation allegory Charles Darwin and Steve Jobs might dream up over beers and mushrooms.

Keithline's eight wire figures occupy a gallery landscape as spare and portentous as the stage of a Samuel Beckett play, a cell culture at the Institute of Teleological Protoplasm or the Kalahari Desert.

Their world features just three elements: wire trees that branch into the ceiling; the hexagonal plates they stand on which resemble diagrams of molecular compounds; and, occupying the gallery center, a bank of 20 computer screens.

Is Keithline, who studied weaving before earning a degree from the Rhode Island School of Design, melding Genesis to "The Origin of Species"?

Perhaps she's offering her own views about the encounter between human aspiration and technology? Or maybe she's recast Rodin's "The Thinker" as a wire man contemplating an uncertain destiny.

"There is no one thing it's supposed to mean," observed Danforth Executive Director Katherine French.

Offering a sort of clue, she said when installing the exhibit Keithline referred to the figure gazing into the computers as "Narcissus," a possible reference to a hunter in Greek mythology who was so enamored of his own good looks that he fell in love with his reflection in a pool and -- unable to abandon it -- died.

Shortly afterward, a class of 6-year-olds visited the gallery, reacting to the figures and few props with gasps, giggles and wide-eyed amazement.

"Wow," said a boy in a Red Sox jersey. "Wow." A little girl nudged her reluctant friend toward a wire figure that seemed to be crawling across a mat of hexagonal tiles.

A red-haired girl edged up to the wire figure sitting on the bank of computers and frowned, looking at the blinking screen that showed similar figures multiplying from a single image into a parade of identical creatures filling all 20 screens.

If Keithline can earn French's approval and mesmerize a class of children, she's doing something right.

French said Keithline makes her figures with assistance from her husband using a process she developed more than 20 years ago called "the lost box" technique.

Initially she wrapped and wove heavy-gauge wire around wooden forms that were then burnt away. For this show, Keithline used a newer approach by weaving wire around mannequins. The wire is then cut and peeled off the mannequin and shaped by Jeff Keithline into the figures in the show.

Keithline organized a companion exhibit in the adjacent gallery, "A Tool is a Mirror," which features eight works mostly made using digital technology with innovative results. Developed for the 2011 Boston Cyberarts Festival as a group show to complement "Smarter/Faster/Higher," it was initially displayed at Mobius Gallery in Boston before coming to the Danforth May 8.

Several works employ technology to express ideas and feelings that would likely prove elusive if made in traditional ways.

Sometimes the technology itself is just dazzling. In a few cases, the artist's intentions are unclear.

Perhaps the most striking, "Transmission from a Dying Planet" appears to be a sort of last will from a doomed civilization that takes the form of fragmentary messages that scroll across a computer screen.

"There was nothing to be gained." "Anger more than careless." "Another private key." "Horried face."

Created by Terry Golob, Michelle Darling and Vade, also known as Anton Marini, the video combines the foreboding and immediacy of radio chatter in Ridley Scott's "Alien" with an apocalyptic sense of the last survivors signing off before the darkness engulfs them.

In her "Hand/Eye" series, Boston multimedia artist Sheila Gallagher takes representational art in a new direction that challenges traditional definitions of what's real and what's abstract.

She created "drawings" by projecting images of female athletes onto a large screen at Boston College's Eye Tracking Lab. As she tried to "draw" the figures with her eyes, a pair of infrared sensors recorded her eye movements every 20 milliseconds. The digital data of her eye movements was translated into a drawing that combined elements of realism and abstraction.

Gallagher said she wanted to explore what happened when the "organ of perception turned out to be the organ of expression." She observed that the "Hand/Eye" series suggests the truth of a familiar classroom cliché: "Representational drawing is about how to look."

In his hybrid painting-video "Kitchen, Door" mixed media artist Erik Sanner combines traditional and high-tech materials with provocative results.

He has set into a painted scene of a kitchen a video screen that shows a recurring loop of a utility worker in a colored vest loudly knocking on the door, clearing away snow to peer through a window pane and shouting to get the occupant's attention.

While most museum visitors spend their time gazing at art on the walls, Sanner has turned the tables by creating a work with people who seem to be trying to get a look at viewers.

THE ESSENTIALS:

WHAT: "Smarter/Faster/Higher" by Elizabeth Keithline in collaboration with Jeff Keithline and "A Tool is a Mirror," an exhibit organized by Elizabeth Keithline featuring work by nine artists

WHEN: Through June 5

WHERE: Danforth Museum of Art, 123 Union Ave., Framingham

HOURS: Noon to 5 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday

ADMISSION: Adults, \$11; seniors, \$9; students, \$8; members, children under 17, free

INFO: 508-620-0050; www.danforthmuseum.org

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