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Sculpture parks: Lithuania to Lincoln



Dennis Oppenheim's "Chair-Pool" at Europos Parkas.

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GLOBE STAFF

VILNIUS, Lithuania - If you were a Bostonian blindfolded and beamed to Europos Parkas, and told

Perspectives on arrival that you were in some new corner of the DeCordova Sculpture Park in Lincoln instead, you might well believe it.

Contemporary sculpture parks are popping up all over the planet, and however remote the location - Europos Parkas is about 11 miles north of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania - there's a curious consistency

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Taking the intimate outdoors

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among them. There is, for instance, their tendency to tap the same pool of international artists. Some of these artists, like the Polish-born sculptor Magdalena Abakanowicz, have become nearly ubiquitous and virtually obligatory. Abakanowicz is currently creating a new work for Europos Parkas; she had a piece on loan to the DeCordova in the 1980s. As one of the most gifted sculptors of her generation she deserves to be everywhere – and she is.

There's also the tendency in sculpture parks to allow these artists a lot of expressive leeway. Outdoor sculpture once affirmed the public, even the macho side of life, celebrating rulers and religions, myths and their makers. Now it's become more personal and contemplative: The intimate has gone outdoors, blown up to a scale suited to landscape.

This global concern with bringing the indoors out is epitomized in a work at Europos Parkas called "Chair-Pool," by American artist Dennis Oppenheim. The gigantic metal piece is in the form of a living room easy chair – not a piece of lawn furniture, although its concave "seat" that holds rainwater looks like a giant birdbath. New work at the DeCordova by Niki Ketchman delves even further into an interior – not a room, but a psyche. Ketchman's "Laced," is a huge lopsided vertical made of purple wire trussed with black cord, like a turkey. Or like a corset-wearing dominatrix, as art critic Arthur Danto observes in his essay in the exhibition's brochure. Mapplethorpean doctored phallus images also spring to mind: Sex plays a major part, often a comic one, in Ketchman's work. Her slightly sagging vertical mounds look like they're waiting for their next dose of Viagra.

A Connecticut resident with a studio in New York, Ketchman is the third artist in the DeCordova's series of yearlong solo shows by sculptors whose work the museum installs in an indoor gallery and on an adjacent terrace outside. Ketchman's "Fabrications" show, on view through May 1999 and organized by DeCordova curator Nick Capasso, includes a group of vertical pieces dangling from a gallery ceiling, collectively called "Closet"; works on paper emphasizing playful patterns and repetition of already over-familiar images, like Botticelli's "Birth of Venus"; and big outdoor pieces made of metal rods, wire, and mesh, which Ketchman weaves or braids, evoking crafts traditionally associated with the feminine, but using industrial materials.

Her sculpture alludes to clothing, shelter, and hair – things that shield humans from the wider world. She combines thundering forms

with unabashedly decorative touches that resemble garlands or even wallpaper borders. A bulging blue metal construction called "Glitters," for instance, is open on one side, and the opening is bordered with cute little pink and green flower and leaf ornaments that might have been borrowed from a birthday cake. The flowers are the sculptural frosting on a puffed-up pastry whose oozing mesh is just barely held in check by knotted blue steel. Here and elsewhere, Ketchman creates grandiose structures with tense, opposing energies – and then deliberately undermines their seriousness with touches that are visual tickles.

In "Corinthian" she makes classical architecture anthropomorphic. Both the base and the capital of this slim column wrapped in gold wire erupt in furious black hairlike tangles of metal. "Crowned" is the reverse – hair given an architectural presence. The long strands of golden aluminum sprouting from a brick wall suggest Rapunzel's tresses – or a pasta machine on overdrive. Humor creeps around the edges of many of Ketchman's pieces.

In "Closet" the humor is completely *out* of the closet. Hanging phallic sculptures are covered with doilies, ribbons, lace, fake fur, beads, stockings, electrical wire, zippers – all teasingly suggestive of an erotic encounter with everybody playing dress-up.

In 1989 the National Geographic Institute of France determined that the center of the European continent was just north of Vilnius. Four years later, Europos Parkas opened, using its propitious location as hopeful symbol of a newly reunited Europe. The sculpture in the park comes not just from Europe, though, but from all over the globe. Artists from as far afield as Japan and Mexico have sent works, often with financial backing from their countries. As a private, nonprofit enterprise in a post-communist nation, Europos Parkas struggles for money.

One of the most moving works in the park is by Lithuanian Gintaras Karosas, whose "Monument of the Center of Europe" is international in both style and outlook. A stone pyramid is surrounded by stone markers, each bearing the name of a European capital and its distance in kilometers from this central point. The simple, factual information conveys a deep yearning for unity and harmony.

Unity of another sort is the goal of Japanese sculptor Tei Kobayashi's "Homage to Marija Gimbutas," a trio of tall, slim columns of different stones, strung together like upright necklaces and serendipitously sited around a pond. They seem to want to connect heaven and earth.

"Requiem for a Dead Pony," by Irish artist



Niki Ketchman's steel and aluminum sculpture "Braided" at the DeCordova.

Laurent Mellet, is a found object construction of rusting metals, with a sound element: Turn a battered old wheel and it produces a haunting, mournful squeak. "Woman Looking at the Moon," by Mexican Javier Cruz, looks a lot like a woman by Picasso. Some of the 30,000 visitors Europos Parkas attracts annually are newlyweds who come to have their picture taken under the sculpture's giant archway.

Like the DeCordova, which focuses, although not exclusively, on art by New Englanders, Europos Parkas has a geographical range that is linked to its mission. The largest Boston area museums do not concentrate on art from this region, so the DeCordova does, filling a gap. Europos Parkas, in a country once cut off from so many others, is just as determined to be global. Its charter trumpets its aim to "establish a dialog between West and East, states and cultures, free and post-communist, rich and living with hardships, among people, among artists."

Despite the two parks' ostensible divergence in purpose, much of their actual art is so similar in spirit that a swap would surprise no one. Works in Europos Parkas including those by Oppenheim, Cruz, and Kobayashi would look perfectly at home on the DeCordova grounds, even though the artists aren't New Englanders: There's no such thing as a New England style of sculpture. And much of what's at the DeCordova would suit the setting of the Lithuanian park, which has been carved out of an ancient forest of evergreens and birches. The art world continues to shrink, regional styles to disappear.

One relic of regionalism remains in Lithuania, though. Like other Soviet-controlled capitals, Vilnius was "blessed" with a statue of Lenin, heroic in scale. After Lithuania gained its freedom, Lenin went into storage. There's talk now that he may be resurrected – in a corner of Europos Parkas.