

Living Arts

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/IANET KNOTT

Laura Donaldson, acting director of the Montserrat College of Art Gallery in Beverly.

Modern art's North Shore exposure

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BEVERLY — The North Shore has historically been a haven for artists. Fitz Hugh Lane painted here 150 years ago. Rockport and Gloucester have boasted thriving summer art colonies, drawing the likes of Winslow Homer and Stuart Davis. These days, most of the galleries showing art here are still caught in the eras of Lane and Homer: Marine art and seascapes are popular. Galleries that exhibit cutting-edge, contemporary art are few and far between.

The Montserrat College of Art Gallery is an exception.

"We have a unique function for the North Shore," says the gallery's acting director, Laura Donaldson. "As a nonprofit, we have the opportunity to show work that's more experimental. It's a chance for artists to expand their boundaries."

Nick Capasso, associate curator at the DeCordova Museum, gets out to Beverly as often as he can. "For me, the gallery's an important resource," he says. "Montserrat has a substantial track record of identifying and presenting the work of important emerging New England artists. The space is beautiful. If they were in Bos-

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Gallery strives to spark conversations with contemporary art

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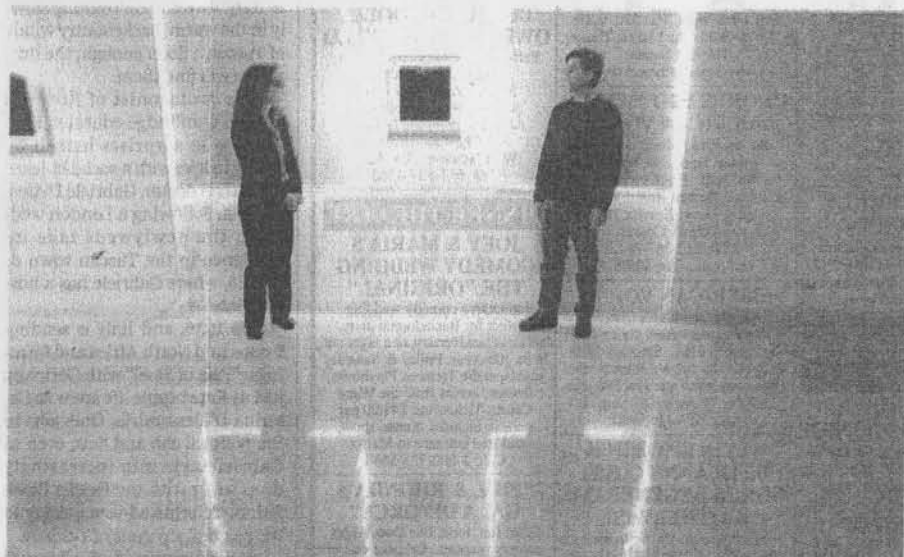
tion, I'd go every month."

"Caught," the small group show now on view (it closes April 6), is an example. Featuring photographs by Charles Cohen and Amir Zaki and an installation of sculpture and film by Bruce Bemis, "Caught" puts the artist in the role of the voyeur, capturing ordinary people in moments of self-reflection, or making the mundane extraordinary. "It's the ephemeral moments you haven't seen before," says Donaldson.

Bemis, who teaches sculpture at Montserrat, knows the travails of finding a venue for installation art, which is often dicey to install and impossible to sell. "To show this work is a challenge and a risk," Bemis acknowledges. His "Reframe Refrain" comprises 16mm-film projectors and glass reflecting images of women swinging and trees blowing. The projectors whirl and click; shadowy figures on small panels suspended on stalks of metal dance to the rhythm of that sound.

"Showing with photographs took my work in a new direction," says Bemis. "I had to use a rear-projection strategy. I develop a piece for a particular venue; it's in the process of showing that it becomes more focused and defined. Laura was willing to take the risk, and the piece evolved as we worked together."

Donaldson took over running the gallery last fall, when longtime director Barbara O'Brien took a semester's leave. As the spring semester approached, O'Brien decided to move on from the job she'd held since 1980, when she took on the part-time assignment



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JANET KNOTT

Laura Donaldson and artist Bruce Bemis at the Montserrat Gallery's current show, "Caught."

of gallery director. It wasn't until 1997 that she went full time, and when she departed, a two-person staff was handling not only the exhibition schedule at the art gallery but shows in three smaller venues, adding up to a total of 50 exhibitions each year. The tiny department also oversees the college's visiting artist program.

"Her dedication, her belief, and her integrity built up a program that could have been simpler in scope and ambition," says Donaldson, who came on as an installation designer in 1998. "But it's more interesting if it's challenging, and she made a challenging program that benefits everyone. It's top-notch artists who show in major museums, while we maintain a dedication to the re-

gion and the state."

Montserrat, which has 375 students, has been an art school since 1970 and started granting undergraduate art degrees in 1983. In 1992, the college moved into several buildings on Essex Street and Cabot Street.

"We had no gallery space at the time," says dean Kate Bodin. "Barbara O'Brien fund-raised and built the space. It had been two classrooms." In addition, O'Brien got galleries for students up and running, and opened the Carol Schlosberg Alumni Gallery, a venue for faculty and alumni, which will also host an exhibition by the National College Society in the fall. Even if the Alumni Gallery showed only work by Montserrat faculty, it could be a strong exhibi-

tion space: Some of the Boston area's better artists make the commute to Beverly to teach at Montserrat — such as sculptor and performance artist Meredith Davis, printmaker Mary Behrens, and sculptor Bart Uchida.

The goal of the Montserrat Gallery, which has had exhibits by artists as diverse as Sol Lewitt and Boston installation artist Linda Price-Sneddon, who works with pipe cleaners and pompoms, is to "spark ideas and conversations," says Donaldson. "It's about fulfilling the mission of the gallery to support the curricular goals of the college."

Donaldson, 32, is herself an artist and weighing whether to apply for the job she's temporarily holding now. She makes sculptur-



Charles Cohen's photographs "Gap" (top) and "Nasdaq" (above), at the Montserrat Gallery, capture people in moments of self-reflection.

cess. But I am an artist, and I'd love to spend more time on that, and this is more than a full-time job."

Bodin says the college expects to make a decision about a permanent director over the summer. In the meantime, Donaldson has her hands full planning the exhibition schedules for all of her galleries a year in advance. Already, she has Rhode Island sculptor Douglas Bosch on the docket for the fall in the Montserrat Gallery. But Donaldson is enjoying the work, as O'Brien did before her, and that is one reason the Montserrat College of Art Gallery has developed its fine reputation.

"I first saw Bruce Bemis's work in a faculty exhibition," Donaldson says, as if she's sharing a juicy secret. "I gave him a small little corner, and it was amazing what he did with it. It was that great moment you stumble on as a curator, when you see a piece and think, 'This is something special. I want to see where this is going and to share this.'"

al furniture and this spring will be awarded the first Barbara Singer Artist Award, given in memory of the Cambridge art dealer who delighted in nurturing young artists.

"I'm giving it a lot of thought," she says of the director's position. "It's rare to find something you can do for a living that combines my talents and interests — my creativity, my sense of design, working with artists, nurturing a pro-