



Exhibits Newslines

by Phyllis Rabineau

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My annual summer call for assistance yielded a few wonderful contributions, and I thought we'd start out by quoting these. First from my colleague Dan Oliver, a whimsical yet insightful report on his family vacation that he has titled *Close Encounters with the International UFO Museum & Research Center and the Roswell (NM) Museum & Art Center*.

"As we entered Roswell, on the highway that becomes Main Street, my first impression was that it was like any small, western desert town. We passed the drugstore, the used car lot, and the local gun shop, which was uncomfortably situated next door to the Christian daycare center. As we entered the downtown—about two minutes later—it became clear that this was no ordinary place. Roswell has embraced the fact that it is associated with stories of U.F.O. sightings, mysterious alien visitors and government conspiracies and cover-ups. The aliens are everywhere in Roswell. Souvenir shops abound, the street lamps are painted like aliens' heads, and nearly every other shop window has a reference to either aliens or U.F.O.s.



"The catch phrase of the International UFO Museum & Research Center (www.iufomrc.org) is 'the Truth is Here!' What the truth *is*, is left for the visitor to decide (as the labels repeatedly say). When you enter the museum, the lobby immediately communicates to you what kind of experience you will have within. Colored lights in the oval soffit overhead chase themselves around. A waving "life-size" fiberglass alien is there for you to have your picture taken with it. The 60s era living room furnishings that appoint the lobby evoke garage sales. You know right away that this is no ordinary museum.

"The exhibits are humble and straightforward. The space is divided mainly by pegboard partitions upon which artifacts and labels are displayed in an evidentiary fashion. The first exhibit tackles the story of the 'Roswell Incident' of 1947 with all of its convoluted theories and possibilities. As one moves from exhibit to exhibit, the boundaries among fact, fiction, art and media representation become blurred, in a way that some might find misleading—but I thought was charming. Footage of the Hollywood film *Roswell* plays in a viewing room, showing scenes of alien dissection. I'm sure there must have been a label somewhere saying that this was only a movie, but I couldn't find it. Artworks, large and small, with an alien theme are on display as well, and were a favorite of my seven year-old son. Crop circles, basic astronomy, alien jokes and other topics are touched on as well. Almost as great as the museum is the gift shop, where I spent my money liberally. You can get anything from alien golf balls to bottle openers (I got one of those). It was such a unique experience that I wanted to buy some *stuff* to remember it by—and of course, I had to get those 3-D holographic postcards for my colleagues at work!



"After the UFO Museum, we went straight to the Roswell Museum & Art Center (www.roswellmuseum.org) for our 'legit' museum-going experience. I feared that it would not be able to compete with the quirky fun of the UFO Museum, but I was, happily, wrong. The Roswell Museum & Art Center's mission seems, at first, to be unmanageable—it covers the early history of rocketry (Goddard did his work in the area), the History of the West, and Art. It is eclectic, but for me, that turned out to be a strength. They seem to have an amazing collection in all three of those areas. The collection of Southwestern art is, not surprisingly, quite strong, but I was especially impressed with how much great art produced in other parts of the country and the world has made its way to little Roswell.

"While I was browsing around the museum I happened to eavesdrop a little on a class that was touring the galleries. From what I heard and saw (they were dressed in military uniform), this was a class of cadets graduating from a local military academy. I listened with amazement as I heard their shoe-shined, no nonsense instructor lecture to them, and engage them in discussion about the significance of art, learning, and creativity in their lives. As they stood before an abstract painting, he spoke about the importance of being open-minded, curious, and open to new experiences and ideas that can expand our own ideas and possibilities. I left the museum a little while later, feeling like *that* was what had just happened to me."

A few weeks later, I received quite a different response from Leslie Bedford:

"I have to tell you about this show at the New York State Museum in Albany. I think Dan Spock is actually the person who alerted it to me—someone did. It will be up until September 19 in case you are anywhere near Albany. It is called *Lost Cases, Recovered Lives: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic*. Very simple, inexpensive, low tech (a couple of videos) and utterly mesmerizing. About 10 people, a startlingly diverse group, are introduced to us through what the exhibit team could learn about them from their scant hospital records, photos and the suitcases of personal artifacts found in the hospital's attic after it closed in the 90s. I don't know when I have seen objects 'speak' so eloquently. Each story is memorable: I will limit myself to the woman who finally fell apart after a lifetime of abuse by an alcoholic husband and the loss of three children. When she just decided to take to her bed, her landlady had her committed to Willard State Hospital where she remained for forty years. Her suitcase was full of handmade baby clothes and such.... And so one thinks about the history of mental health, the impact of psychotherapy, the effects of patient rights laws, the meaning of institutionalization as well as loneliness, parenthood, aging and all such common themes

—and comes away thinking 'there but for the grace....' Both the in-house curator and the consulting curators, who are mental health experts and advocates, were eager to draw connections between the history of this grim place and current mental health efforts.

"Because I am into such themes as storytelling and how exhibits can encourage imaginative thinking (and thus real learning!), I was more inspired by this than perhaps everyone would be. But having spoken to the curator, I learned that the exhibit has been very successful with many kinds of audiences and they are all feeling very good about their work, which was groundbreaking for this museum. They would love to find a way to travel it, but are already on to the next, as one tends to be."

Another endorsement of this exhibition came my way from Maryellen Munley, who added, "I found it chilling; the personal stories are moving, and the cumulative effect of the stories, the personal belongings, the photographs, and the music gave me a real human connection to the larger issues of mental health in this country." The museum's website (www.nysm.nysed.gov) further explains that when the Willard Psychiatric Center closed in 1995, hundreds of trunks and suitcases were found, belonging to deceased patients admitted between 1898 and 1965. The suitcases are now in the museum's history collection.



The suitcase belongings of Margaret D., a Scotland native, who was a nurse when admitted to Willard State Hospital in 1941. From the exhibit, *Lost Cases, Recovered Lives: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic* at the New York State Museum. Photograph courtesy of Lisa Rinzler.

While we're on the theme of health, I'll pass along a show that was brought to my attention by Russell Lewis. *RN: The Past, Present and Future of the Nurses' Uniform* was presented last winter at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia in conjunction with the Center for the Study of the History of Nursing, University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing. You'd think this would make for Dullsville, but evidence of the stunning catalogue and the information still available at the museum's website

(www.fabricsworkshopandmuseum.org) shows this was a very unusual project, organized by artists Mark Dion and J. Morgan Puett to “investigate the often subtle ways in which the uniform, by design, informs notions of identity, professional hierarchy, and labor within the field. The exhibition addressed the past, present and future of the nurses’ uniform by combining historical artifacts with the artists’ creation of the Ideal Nurses’ Uniform for the contemporary nurse and futuristic uniforms such as Bioterrorism Nurse, Post-Apocalyptic Nurse, and Intergalactic Nurse.” The Past section of the exhibit was presented as a straight-ahead historical exhibit of cases and mannequins including archival materials and clothing in the collections of the University of Pennsylvania. Things got more interesting in the Present section, which was based on focus groups conducted with retired, practicing and student nurses, and on an on-line questionnaire that was distributed to additional nurses. Based on this research, Dion and Puett designed an ideal uniform, which was manufactured within the exhibit site in a working reconstruction of the factory of the defunct Marvin Nietzel Nursing Uniform Company. And in the Future section of the exhibit, the artists presented their designs inspired by science fiction and by new materials technology. My favorite is the Diagnostic Nurse, a uniform that would be made of conductive fibers to gather and transmit information about a patient’s vital signs; all the nurse would need to do is hug the patient to collect data on vital signs, endocrine levels, fluid samples, and DNA sequences. The nurse’s gloves are envisioned as sensors capable of micro-sampling, ultrasound and other non-invasive imaging techniques.

Speaking of unlikely exhibit topics, even though its run at the Atlanta History Center (www.atlantahistorycenter.com) is long ended, every summer Don Rooney fondly remembers an exhibit on air conditioning called *Keepin’ Cool*. The exhibit looked at the various ways Southerners have “beat the heat” through the ages, following ingenuity and creativity across Georgia and the South to show how the region embraced the technology of air conditioning and refrigeration and how, in turn, these technologies influenced the region. The history starts in the 1890s, when an array of technological advancements “conditioned” air for comfort and health, adjusting the temperature and also its humidity, velocity and cleanliness. Early in the 20th century, air conditioning originally impacted industrial production and only later brought human comfort to working and living. The phenomenal growth within the Sunbelt is attributed to the ability to work, live and prosper, all within air-conditioned comfort. Among the signature artifacts in the exhibition were the first residential AC unit in Atlanta (heavier and larger than Civil War Cannon); a General Electric, double-door, monitor-top refrigerator, 1928; a chilled water fountain from Atlanta Baptist

Tabernacle, 1927; and a Coca-Cola chest type cooler, c. 1947. Other objects included iceboxes, electric fans, and swimsuits. Eloquent Southern writers provided a voice for the exhibit, including this from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*: “The house quiet, ‘cept for the flies. They swing through every now and then, drunk from eating and enjoying the heat, buzz enough to make me drowsy.”



Coca-Cola cooler in the exhibit “Keepin’ Cool,” Atlanta Historical Society

I don’t know how she did it, but Karen Fort somehow found time this summer to take a moment away from planning the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian to turn me on to Presidents Park (www.presidentspark.org). Located in Williamsburg, VA, one of the country’s great tourist meccas, Presidents Park offers visitors “a patriotic, educational and inspiring experience” (to quote their website) with its display of 18- to 20-foot tall concrete busts of all forty-three Presidents. Aside from posing for photographs among the Easter Island-like behemoths, visitors can discover important trivia (James K. Polk survived a gallbladder operation with no anesthesia!). This attraction features the whole gamut of museum-like features, from living history performances, to school resources, to a well-stocked gift shop. David Adickes, the Texas-based artist behind the park, has a previous track record of giganto sculptures, including a six-story statue of Sam Houston located outside his eponymous city.

I guess the transition this time is from giant heads to totem poles; this also came in from Leslie Bedford. “I just came back from a conference on education and imagination in Vancouver and finally got to the anthropology museum at UBC (www.moa.ubc.ca). The one with the amazing Northwest Coast art collection, much of it displayed in the Great Hall, a cavernous room whose glass walls invite you to imagine these spectacular wooden objects in their original settings. Their visual storage system is also famous, I believe and is certainly stunning. But my main reaction was to realize how incredibly innovative the Boston Childrens Museum had been in the 1970s–80s when it

turned the Northeast Indian Collection, and later the Japanese collection, into visual storage for visitors. Unlike UBC visitors in Boston can enter the collection and really learn from it through an ingeniously simple system of red, yellow and green hands on labels attached to every object. Meanwhile, the UBC collection is still tucked away behind glass, accessible only to scholars. For visitors the only way to learn about the stuff in front of you is to track it down in enormous notebooks. I was fascinated by a small painted wooden skeleton-like figure with long hair and knees carved into tiny skulls; it reminded me vividly of Mexican Day of the Dead figures. Having spent the fall in Mexico, for me this was a constructivist experience if ever there was one! After diligent searching, I learned I was looking at a contemporary puppet. Period. But, on a more positive note, a group of museum studies students had mounted their own exhibit about point of view. Called *Site to Sight: Imagining the Sacred* it explored different sites in the Vancouver area through the eyes of two students: one a First Nation man, the other a European/Christian woman. Cheap, all photos, but imaginative and interesting."

As long as you're out there on the left coast, Darcie Forman invites you to visit *Question*, her latest project, developed in collaboration with staff at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University. The installation responds to questions about art gleaned from talking with the public, for example What is artistic quality? What do these pieces mean? Who decides what is art or who is an artist? Exhibit teams were assigned specific questions, and then selected objects from the Center's 26,000-item collection to use in exploring their theme. Objects from different times and cultures are juxtaposed to reinforce a point or highlight differing views. As well as the main 4,200 square foot installation, the idea is further explored in relation to objects scattered throughout the museum galleries, and visitors are invited to offer their feedback. In addition to films and lectures, the exhibit curators are offering a five-week course on "Question" in the University's continuing studies program.

I'd like to wind up this installment with my own recommendations. Closest to home, and to my heart, are two wonderful exhibits at my own institution, the Chicago Historical Society (www.chicagohistory.org). We are particularly proud of *Teen Chicago*, a truly innovative exhibit that recounts the history of adolescence over the past century. It's a subject to which everyone can relate, and we are having a great time watching kids, as well as their parents, grandparents and younger siblings, explore videos, listen to oral histories, play with interactives, and ogle clothing styles, bedroom furnishings, high school yearbooks, and other familiar and fun objects that reach across the generations. The colors and shapes of the high-concept design; off-the-wall mobiles made of graduation



A view of Teen Chicago. Photograph courtesy of Chicago Historical Society.

caps, records, cassettes and CDs; and a bunch of sassy videos frame the stories. An awesome group of Chicago teenagers helped curate the show, and kept it true to the independent spirit of their age. In a totally different mood is *Leopold and Loeb: The "Perfect" Crime*, an exhibit that recounts the haunting story of the murder of a 14-year old boy, Bobby Franks, by two very disturbed young men in 1924 Chicago. Using the conventions of a police procedural, the exhibit tracks the killers hour-by-hour, and presents original trial evidence that's never before been on public display. And it turns out that there's still quite a lot of folks still obsessed with the case; the exhibit includes four pieces of original contemporary artwork, and a song by Billy Corgan honoring Bobby Franks.

Also in my hometown, I want to give plugs to a couple of municipal attractions. The Chicago Cultural Center (www.chicagoculturalcenter.org), housed downtown in a beautifully restored Beaux Arts building that was the former central library, has been offering a series of really fine exhibitions over the past six or eight months. They're currently showing *Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations, 1979–2000*, the first retrospective of Wilson's work, an ongoing investigation into the relationship of museums, society and racism. The Center is also showing *Raw, Boiled and Cooked: Comics on the Verge* —storyboards, installations, video and computer art by more than forty artists. Earlier this year, I enjoyed *Isn't That Amazing! The Appeal and Spiel of Ronco and Popeil*, a crazy survey of gadgets made by the Popeil family, including your favorites and mine such as the Veg-o-Matic, the Chop-o-Matic, the Inside-the-Shell Egg Scrambler, and yes the Pocket Fisherman. The exhibit explained in loving detail the origins and development of the Popeil salespitch and infomercial, and wacky programming that included a gourmet dinner prepared entirely by slicing and dicing on Popeil machines, and a disco party set to tunes from Ronco's "Original Hits by Original Artists." Also earlier this spring at the Cultural Center, I saw *Hair Stories*, a provocative and original show organized by the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art to explore the cultural and political meanings of hair among



African Americans. Extraordinarily diverse artworks by twenty-six artists, spanning more than eighty years—from the Harlem Renaissance to today—were organized around four themes: “good” hair and “bad” hair; the barbershop and the beauty shop; the symbolism of hair; and individuality in hairstyles. The Cultural Center has become a major venue in Chicago for thoughtful new art; when you’re in town, please stop by. (And it’s only a short stroll across the street to Millennium Park, with its extraordinary architecture, sculpture and video fountains.)

Some of you attended our session at AAM, featuring unusual New Orleans museums. For those who missed the program, I want to recommend and thank our four participants. First up was the Pharmacy Museum

(www.pharmacymuseum.org), housed in the French Quarter in the 1823 home of America’s first licensed pharmacist. Step inside, and you’re immersed in a world of glass jars bearing intriguing labels and containing strange-looking organic and mineral substances. Of prime interest is the yucky display on leeches. Next, we were introduced to the Louisiana Marine Fisheries Museum

(<http://fisheriesmuseum.com>), located in Lafitte, a Cajun town south of NOLA on Bayou Barataria. Exhibits and education programs are devoted to preserving Cajun traditions of boatbuilding, fishing and trapping. Stop by, and the museum’s extraordinarily friendly volunteers will draw you deeply into their colorful stories; it’s a great way to pass a languid day. Our third museum was the Backstreet Cultural Museum (<http://backstreetculturalmuseum.com>), located in the Tremé District of New Orleans and dedicated to exhibits on Mardi Gras Indians, Jazz Funerals and Second Line Parades. Playing a central role in community preservation, the museum maintains a regular newsletter announcing the location of the season’s parades, and assists marchers in researching, preserving and using their regalia. Furthest from the city in Abita Springs, but worth every minute of the 23-mile trip across Lake Ponchartrain, is the UCM Museum (<http://ucmmuseum.com>). I almost hate to try to describe this place to you; it has to be experienced. Let me quote from the museum’s brochure: “Have you ever walked along a foot path and stopped to pick up an interesting rock? John Preble has, thousands of times, and there weren’t only rocks, there were bottles, bottle caps, license plates, springs, motors, pottery shards, and ‘what all.’ And he didn’t throw any of it away, instead it all eventually came together in the fantastic man-made world known as the UCM Museum.... Using tens of thousands of found objects, and home-made inventions, Preble created incredible miniature Southern towns with terrific cane pole fishing, pick-up driving, Mardi Gras parading, UFO spotting, voodoo fortune telling, blues playing, alligator wrestling, pecan shelling and Cajun cooking animated action. These mini towns are the main attractions of the UCM.



Entrance to main exhibit gallery at the UCM Museum, Abita Springs, LA

Throughout the museums there are push-buttons that activated animated displays.” Among the featured exhibits are Buford the Amazing Twenty-four Foot Bassigator, the flying saucer that crashed into an Airstream Trailer, and the House of Shards. Throughout, there’s a sense of *horror vacui*, every square inch of wall pasted over with scraps of metal, discarded cellphones and computer mice, whatever. There’s nothing else like it!



Typology of cellphones and hardware at the UCM Museum, Abita Springs, LA