

**LEE BOROSON**

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sara meltzer gallery

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**STYLE**  
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**Hudson on the James**

**New York sculptor Lee Boroson winks at classic American painting in a witty Reynolds Gallery installation.**

by Edwin Slipek Jr.  
May 19, 2004



In "Outpost," an exhibition by New York sculptor Lee Boroson at the Reynolds Gallery, you'll confront works with grand, dense themes. But you won't be intimidated — you'll be charmed.

Boroson is fascinated by the work of the 19th-century American Hudson River artists such as Thomas Cole. Their depictions of nature — clouds, woodlands and the sun's warm rays — suggested limitless possibilities for American expansion and personal experience. Boroson's second, parallel idea is that civilization is infringing on nature to such an extent that there are, indeed, limits to manifest destiny.

None of this philosophizing is initially apparent at the Reynolds because Boroson's five pieces are deceptively pretty and crafted with breathtakingly immaculate care. The work has an edge, but it goes down as smoothly as cotton candy.

Witness "Lucky Storm," which was constructed especially for the Reynolds space. Walking into the large front gallery, one is immediately delighted by a voluptuous, billowy canopy of inflated nylon. It covers the entire ceiling space. The tones of this inflatable range from white to deep pink. This "cloud" hangs just above head level and is punctuated seven times by sizable openings from which "rain" pours down. It's not really rain, but

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simulated downpours that take the form of 8-inch columns made of fishing line. These fine nylon columns are attached to the floor by stainless-steel panels shaped like large Lucky Charms. The overall effect is beautiful and serene on one level, a "pop" interpretation of Thomas Cole's allegorical paintings on another.

In a second room, Boroson, who teaches sculpture at the Rhode Island School of Design, presents an entirely different but equally ambitious piece. "Wood Trim" is a cloth sculpture that hangs from the ceiling — panels of faint green nylon fabric. The fabric has been punctured in a few hundred places to create leaves that dangle and flutter slightly with any breeze. This is a sublime piece that seems much bigger than it is. And it's movingly nature-affirming.

In addition to these two installation pieces, Boroson is showing a pair of works, each inspired by an actual building.

His starting point in "Pratt's Castle, Richmond, Virginia" (2004) was an archival photograph of a curious old mansion that once lorded over Gamble's Hill. (It was demolished in 1956 to make way for the Ethyl Corp. headquarters building.) Boroson places the photograph in a backlit light box (similar to the ones used for ads on airport concourse walls). To this updated, boxy display, Boroson has affixed hundreds of clear glass bubbles. These add a third dimension and place the "castle" in the clouds. Hanging next to "Pratt's Castle" is another light box, "Anonymous Corporate Complex, Westchester, New York" (2004). It contains a color photograph of a bland two-story suburban office building with a smooth glass skin. Almost creepily, Boroson has affixed small green plastic leaves all over the surface of the light box. Is he decrying that nature was destroyed for this faceless development or will nature, one day, reclaim this real estate? There is tremendous wit in these works, as if Boroson is winking at us.

The fifth and most decorous piece in the show, "Contrail," picks up on the theme of the glass bubbles. Here, the small spheres have been affixed to cable wire and create a graceful swag that adorns a gallery stairwell.

Recently, an art critic for the New York Observer newspaper wrote that New York art museums showing contemporary work face a serious challenge. They can't keep up with hundreds of galleries that are much closer to artists — galleries can respond quickly to emerging trends and ideas.

This idea kept occurring to me as I wandered through "Outpost." Compared to New York, Richmond has few galleries. But for highly conceptual, strong ideas, jaw-dropping craftsmanship, historical context and elegant installation, the Reynolds presentation of Boroson's "Outpost" is museum-worthy in every good way. **S**