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ART REVIEW

Breaking down the beauty of Styrofoam The Boston Globe

By Cate McQuaid
Globe Correspondent / March 28, 2008

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PROVIDENCE - Oh, Styrofoam! We love how it insulates and protects. We hate how it won't biodegrade. If you're an artist sculpting Styrofoam, you're using a material fraught with societal ambivalence. Not to mention workplace hazards: Sculptors may expose themselves to toxic vapors when using heat on Styrofoam. But by golly, it's lightweight and easy to shape.

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Styrofoam

At: The Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, through July 20. 401-454-6500, rismuseum.org

Contemporary art curator Judith Tannenbaum was prompted to organize "Styrofoam," at the RISD Museum of Art, after she saw a Styrofoam installation by Dutch sculptor Folkert de Jong at last year's Armory Show in New York. In Tannenbaum's catalog essay, de Jong says he uses the material for two reasons: "For its immoral content and because of its tantalizing sweetness."

And tantalizing "Styrofoam" is. A small exhibit with fewer than 20 works by 10 artists, the show packs a lot into a little - political content, minimalist beauty, graphic narrative, and exquisite craftsmanship. It

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spotlights a broad range of artists, from the daddy of conceptual art, Sol LeWitt, to fresh contemporary faces such as de Jong.

Part of de Jong's Armory Show installation, which featured life-size sculptures of Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln, is on view here as "The Piper." Here we have Lincoln, our national hero, as a garish, green-faced zombie with blue teeth.

His red eyes appear to roll up in his head, as if he's drug-addled or entranced. He wears a red kilt and carries pink bagpipes. With its gaudy, splashed-on colors, the piece makes a wonderful mix of dark Northern European Expressionism, kitsch, and scathing political commentary.

LeWitt's two crisp installations, "Black Styrofoam on White Wall" and "White Styrofoam on Black Wall" greet the viewer inside the museum's entry. LeWitt, who died last year, often worked by sending installation instructions to a site and having it made there. In this case, his estate issued the directions, and RISD students broke sheets of Styrofoam apart and mounted the shards on two walls.

From a distance, the results resemble a shattered marble floor. These monumental and imposing pieces loom, yet up close you can see the bubbly Styrofoam texture, and they become more approachable, even welcoming.

Polystyrene foam was first manufactured in the 1930s, and Dow Chemical Company trademarked the name Styrofoam, which tends to be used as ubiquitously as Kleenex. For all its toxicity, Styrofoam has a wonderful accessibility. Several artists here have built careers on their use of everyday materials. Tom Friedman has used soap, spaghetti, and bubblegum in his art. His untitled Styrofoam sculpture marries austere minimalism with whimsy: It's a 40-inch cube of sky blue, with rounded corners. Blue powder dusts the floor. It's like a shaved-down sugar cube. A bee, also crafted from blue Styrofoam, hovers at the end of a wire attached to the cube's top, as if ready to land and taste the sweetness. [Continued...](#)

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