

"Play/Work: Back and Forth"

Karen Mahaffy and Alex Lopez

at Rose Amarillo gallery

by John Ewing

Homecomings stir up memories. The visits we make to our old stomping grounds can have an unexpected effect on us. We find surprises in memory, and in some way surprises always impact the future. Karen Mahaffy and Alex Lopez (former UTSA students now associated with Alfred University in New York) returned to San Antonio in July to play with memory and try new work. Surprisingly, their installation at Rose Amarillo is *not* a collaboration. "Play/Work: Back and Forth" is an exchange between opposites: body/mind, inside/outside, childhood/maturity. It's a survey of boundaries, summarizing older tendencies in the artists' work and charting new territory for both.

The large gallery space with its four central columns is shared equally, but a tour through the small groupings of objects quickly reveals Mahaffy's and Lopez's distinct orientations. His work is technology-based gadgetry hovering in the upper reaches. Hers is low-tech and "gravity bound."

"Princess Theory," a stack of white fabric discs quilted with sugar padding, exemplifies Mahaffy's technique and strategies.

"I like dealing with the weight of things, things compressed together," says Mahaffy. "I think it relates to our weight, our posture. We have a sense of layering and compression when things start to droop and hang heavy."

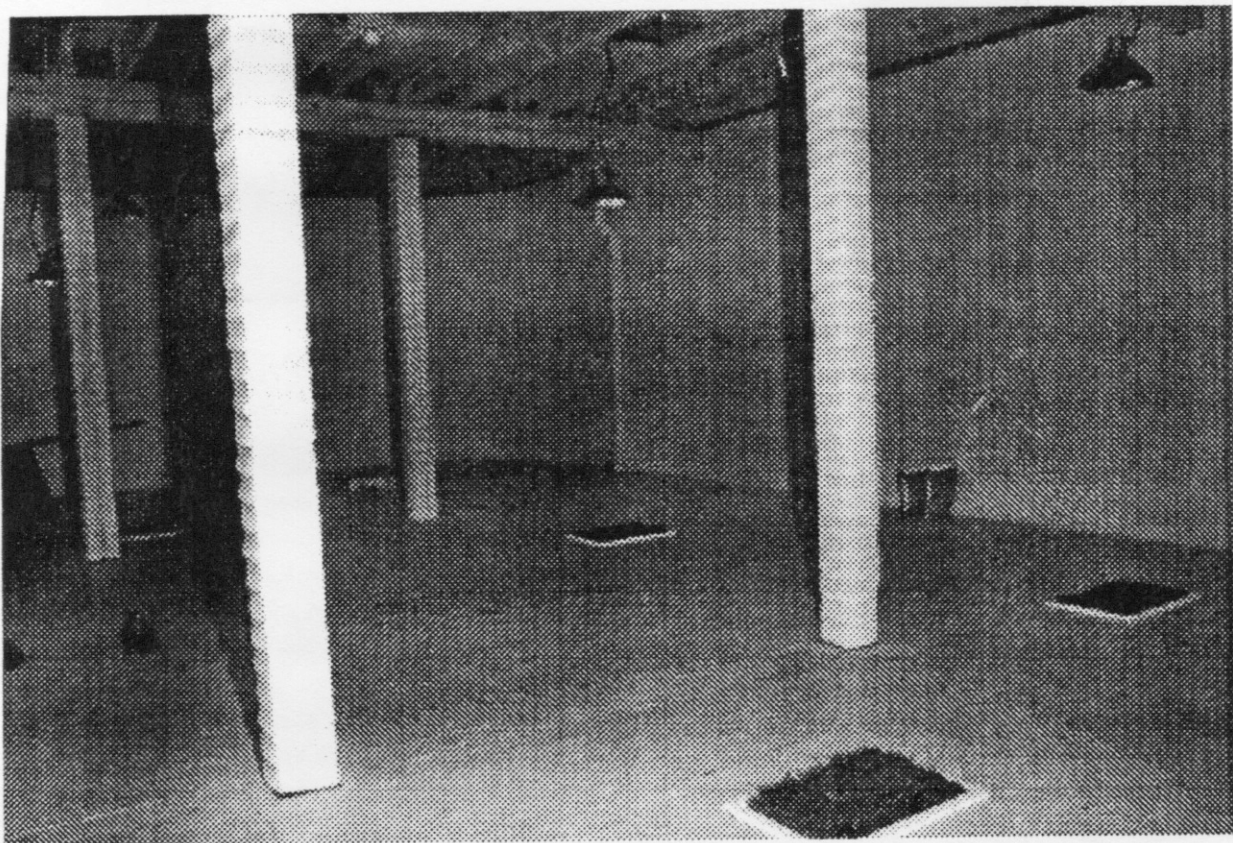
Weight, texture and body relatedness are echoed in each of her pieces. The four wrapped columns continue the formal repetition with finely crafted

ribbed segments that "head down into the ground." Their soft, puffed textures have a delectable sensuality, and the tidy lacings on one edge give them a familiar orderliness. This familiarity encouraged the young Madison Nye to open a touching relationship with the work at the reception. He discovered that the ribs were actually neat pockets stuffed with salt.

"There is a longing to touch," says Mahaffy of her work. "But even if we're afraid to break that barrier, we have a sense of what it feels like to touch these forms. We know what kind of weight they might have. I think that's important. We have memories not necessarily in our heads. They are physical memories of sensations, perhaps in our abdomens, of relationships to things."

That relationship can also be adversarial. As much as Mahaffy's work evokes the organic free-form in nature, there is also a superego presence waiting to reel it in. Eyes and hooks, fastening loops and lacings restrain her loosely-structured forms, adding humor as they discipline. Against a wall, two squat "figures" are puffy and amorphous. Girdled with lace-up mattress ticking, the constrained forms are approximations of each other, leaning together for further support. There is something funny about tightening an object, which from the start is arbitrary and contrived. It's an existential precept enacted with fabric.

Bouncing off the abstracted weightiness of Mahaffy's forms (which suggest gravity's pull and the pressures of adult life), Alex Lopez uses high-



tech toys to recall the lightness of childhood. His video "settings" retrieve playful moments from memory and recreate them in the form of museum anachronisms. Television monitors stripped of their protective housing hang from the ceiling throughout the gallery. On the floor below are squared-off pieces of sod. Visitors can lie down, rest their heads on the grass and watch clouds float by in real time on the video screens above.

Symbolically loaded, these "settings" are rife with metaphorical and associative readings. While lovely images from a childhood idyll, they simultaneously connect the shag carpet and "boob tube" settings of the American family room. Also at play is the tension between inside/outside spaces, real and edited time, natural and synthetic creation. When the boundaries are crossed, these defining labels start to slide.

"It's a dark story, a dark play," says Lopez. "It's about things hidden away, so they are dark and in a sense need to be brought back into the light. As artists, we play a lot, but I don't think we always understand that we're not playing on the level that maybe we were as children."

There is a curious, disorganized collection of audio speakers creating a low, closed space in a corner of the gallery. Stepping over them into the corner activates the sound of barking dogs, a dreaded moment without peer in the experience of a child. The insubstantiality of the tiny speakers (salvaged from headphones used in grade school hearing tests) and the visitor's control of the gallery experience is sweet but delayed revenge.

Likewise, a motorized seesaw in the opposite corner goes up and down next to another sod/TV combination. The scene is placed too close to a wall

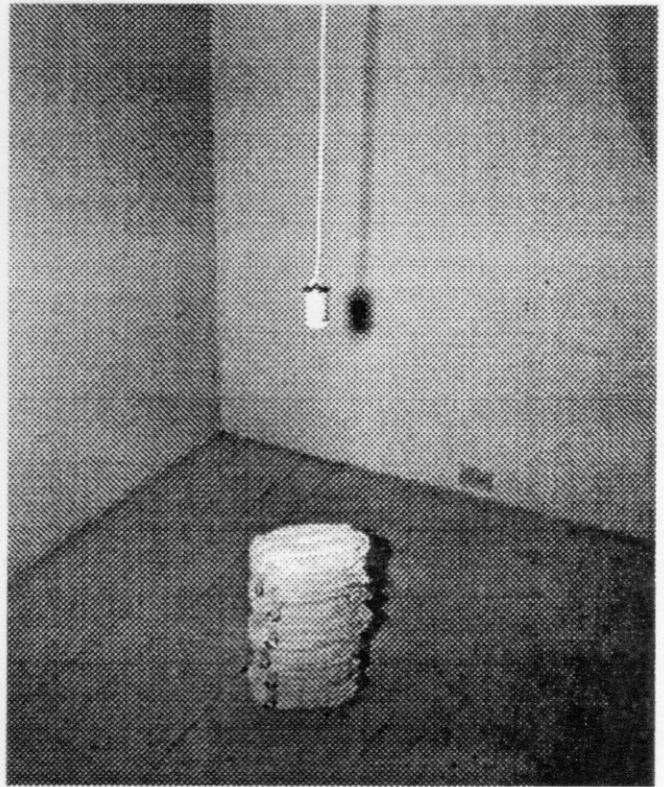
for any adult-sized viewer. With a ghostly purposefulness, the seesaw mimics the rhythm particular to memory.

"I can't fit there... but I can," Lopez says, describing this tight piece designed for children. "My mind can fit there. It remembers that point of view, that scale." Lopez's recollections strike the right note, recreating the carefree timelessness that is emblematic of a healthy childhood but vexing in an adult context. Through a veil of regret, his scenes reminisce without pandering to clichés of innocence.

Where Mahaffy and Lopez do collaborate, the results are an interesting mix of body and mind. In the gallery's rounded corner (an enduring vestige of Michael O'Malley's 1996 installation) Mahaffy has arranged an ordered line of identical sugar-stuffed forms resembling nothing if not chicken carcasses. A video projection of a red balloon bobs side to side above the forms. It's Lopez's attempt to "cheer up" the fat-bellied sentinels, objects Mahaffy considers "pitiful and funny because they have no prior life or function." Without potential, there is neither safety nor purpose in numbers, only yearning.

A surprise for the artists as well as for the viewer is how differently the same elements can play another way. A gallery door has been removed and a parachute silk screen hung in its place. One of the modified chicken forms is suspended in the space behind and its diffused shadow is projected onto the screen. Although the same basic shape, the object in shadow form, like all shadows, is anything but pitiful.

"You can feel the screen, but you can't feel the object," says Lopez, describing the mysterious effect. "Because you don't know what the exact object is, it's out of reach on several levels." Mahaffy points out a natural flaw in the weave of the screen which creates the unforeseen impression of laundry hanging from a clothesline, another childhood memory that plays nicely with the nearby seesaw arrangement.



Perhaps the biggest surprise of all is what the artists have learned about themselves. By coming "home" *not* to collaborate (and collaborate a little) they feel refreshed and free to try new things.

"My work has been very narrative," Lopez reflects. "But I'm really trying to get away from that. I think the black seesaw is a goodbye to certain things."

"I think of sewing and see that it has become a device that I may need to let go of," says Mahaffy. "We all develop formulas in our work, progressive steps even within a single project that are very comfortable."

And on collaborating?

"We're both so definite about our ideas that it was a surprise working together," says Mahaffy.

"It's still very hard," adds Lopez, "but we're too young to be comfortable."