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Jennifer

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Annual sculpture exhibit challenges students to work with the environment

The five "figures" resembled pre-historic birds: gawky, bulbous shapes atop skinny legs. The lumpy bodies stopped abruptly at the waistline, lacking torsos, arms, heads.

They stood in a row at the rear of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, strategically spaced so that they retreated into the woods behind the building. "Hiding" was the name artist Jen Bergeron had given this sculpture, according to the near-by placard.

"When you make something," explains Bergeron, a '95 cum laude grad, "you try to focus on something that you know about, something you feel."

So, when she was assigned to create a sculpture that would be placed on the UMass Dartmouth campus, Bergeron tapped into her convictions about images of women—their own and society's.

She combined steel for shaping; pairs and pairs of pantyhose; and lots of plaster poured over the hose to fashion the ungainly, awkward-looking figures. Women struggle daily into these uncomfortable, easily-torn hose: "This speaks to what women go through, to cover up their imperfections," says Bergeron. "And my roommates freak out when they don't have a pair without a run."

Bergeron's sculpture was one of 14 installed on campus last spring by the senior sculpture majors. Each year, the sculpture professors direct their students to design and construct works for the "Annual Student Sculpture Exhibit." The campus comes alive with sculptures that are intriguing and provocative, and the students are challenged to design pieces for the outdoors.

"Art in the environment, in the outdoors, is critically important" to a student's education, says Sculpture Prof. Eric Lintala. With the campus as their setting, the sculpture majors have a learning experience "that isn't readily available at a lot of schools. . . . This allows them to work on a huge scale, something they're not used to doing."

"I wanted a well-rounded environment, so I could be with people who had a lot of different majors."

The student pieces are always distinguished by their creativity and the variety of the messages sent. In her "Learned Behavior," student Devon Largey seats a large ball atop a tall table; the ball appears to be a trash bag entwined by a sort of rope. The work, Largey explains, represents a "controlled behavior that is instilled in...one during childhood."

Stephen Gaul takes what he calls a satirical look at play in "Sandboxes," comprising four rectangular shapes open at the top. In one, a leg and sneakered foot rises up from the sand; a second, tall and narrow, has plastic toys virtually spilling from it.

For the students, this assignment is both demanding and exciting, says Bergeron. "I liked the opportunity to show in an outdoors area. It's a good thing to know how to work in the environment, how to make a piece fit into a place."

Exhibiting outside also means more people experience art, notes Bergeron. "People were more or less forced to see our work. A lot of people liked it and they said they were intrigued by it."

Once students come up with an idea for their sculpture, they need to determine its feasibility and discuss its implementation with their classmates and their

professors. Conceiving a design is only one part of the daunting work facing the students—they have to decide how to finance their sculpture, how they'll acquire and transport the materials, and how they'll install it. Prof. Lintala shies away from telling students what will or will not work; "I'm a guide" to help students transform their ideas into reality.

The professors' accessibility impressed Bergeron throughout her time at UMass Dartmouth. "They're really available to the students. I had the sense that if I needed something at 10 o'clock at night, I could call them and feel comfortable about it."

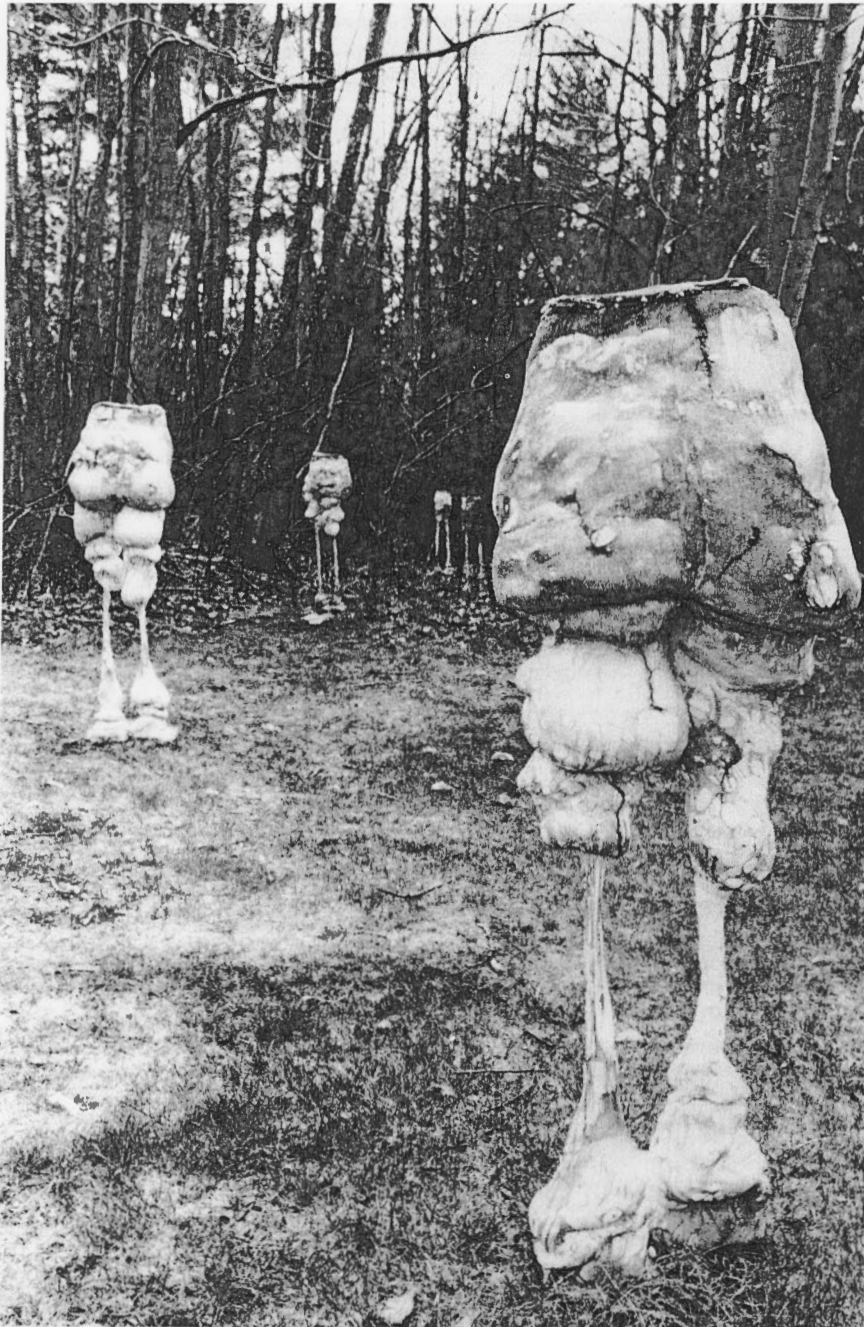
Bergeron's desire to study art in college took hold when, as a junior in high school, she began taking art courses. She was selected for an intensive six-week summer program for high schoolers at Rhode Island School of Design. When it was time to choose a college, she selected UMass Dartmouth primarily for three reasons: its affordability, the reputation of its arts curriculum, and the fact that it was a university.

"I wanted a well-rounded environment, so I could be with people who had a lot of different majors.

"Here, I've lived with English majors, nursing majors, an accounting student, graphic arts and painting majors—we all feed off one another.

"I'm glad that I had to take a lot of other courses (other than arts). Writing courses, for example, help when you're thinking and writing about your work. My women's studies courses—they directly tie to my work now."

Bergeron initially planned to major in painting. But, as she went through the university's foundation courses—required of most arts majors—she got more involved in three-dimensional work, "and I really enjoyed it. I switched to sculpture. I like to work with different materials and get into building things."



Student Jen Bergeron used plaster and pantyhose to create her work of sculpture, entitled "Hiding." Senior sculpture majors

annually are assigned to design pieces that are placed outdoors, near the College of Visual and Performing Arts.

The foundation courses, required of all visual arts majors, give students a firm base in drawing and two and three-dimensional design. "The courses are definitely important," says Bergeron. "What you learn is all necessary. I had always thought about three-dimensional work, but I hadn't considered sculpture."

Bergeron found her courses grew more demanding—and the assigned work more sophisticated—as she progressed through her major. Over the years, the amount of freedom for students increased; simultaneously, students assumed more responsibility for doing quality work on time. Critical to her education, she says, was the bond among the students.

"The sculpture majors are a very tight group. Everyone gets involved with one another's work, and there's a lot of feedback."

While still a student, Bergeron exhibited her work at Fitchburg Art Museum, near her home in Ashburnham, as well as in an exhibit in New York City. She submitted work at Prof. Lintala's prodding: "if it hadn't been for his pushing, I wouldn't think of doing that until after I'd gotten out of school."

"In this department, the teachers really get you involved in showing your work."

Nowhere was that more apparent than at the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston last May. The graduating sculpture students and faculty from all UMass campuses mounted an exhibit of their work in a show curated by UMass Dartmouth Prof. Sally Fine.

The exhibit represented an opportunity few young artists are given, and the reviews of the pieces were enthusiastic. Wrote the *Boston Globe*: "There is much to admire. . . . Several UMass Dartmouth students contribute outstanding work."