

The New York Times

Copyright © 2005 The New York Times

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, AUGUST 21, 2005

\$4.50 beyond the green

ART REVIEW/HELEN A. HARRISON

Islip Show Sets Sail on a Metaphor

'Boats'

*Islip Art Museum, 50 Irish Lane, East Islip, (631) 224-5402.
Through Sept. 11.*

Boats are not only functional but also symbolic, and the 59 artists in this group show present them in both guises. The guest curator, Judy Collischan, emphasized the subjectivity of her choices within the theme and in each artist's approach to it.

For those who like seascapes, pictures of harbors and sails in the sunset, there are plenty of options here. But those are not the show's most engaging works. It is the metaphoric aspect of the floating vessel, in which the boat represents something more than just itself, that stirs the imagination.

Jen Schwarting's video "The Great Return" shows a swimmer towing a small, brightly colored dinghy. The action is almost all shot from below the water's surface, as with slow, steady strokes the swimmer comes into view, passes and disappears. Everything is in question, including the swimmer's point of origin, her destination and the nature of her cargo.

Another video, Chris Coffin's "Boats," is less cryptic but equally evocative, using boat models as surrogates for family members. A toy battleship represents Uncle Bill, and Grandma's peanut butter and jelly sandwich, cut into four pieces, becomes white sail-like shapes cruising around a lake that is actually a blue plate. In a similar setting, Rachel Vaters-Carr's "Circumnavigation" sculpture uses folded paper instead of bread to epitomize jaunty sailboats.

In several works, ambiguity enriches the boat form's interpretive potential. "Skeleton Ships/The Aral Sea," by Linda Byrne, is a group of wire and wax forms, apparently crusted with dried salt, that resemble both wrecked vessels and the bones of the sailors who went down with them. Susan Kirby's "U-Vote You-Boat," with a torn cloth surface revealing a menace below, uses an equivocal title to critique rigged elections, in which voters' rights are symbolically torpedoed by a stealthy predator.