

GALLERIES

Dense with symbols, work conjures magic and mystery

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | June 17, 2005

Maureen McCabe's assemblages at Vose Galleries are filled with ingredients as unlikely and as provocative as a witch's brew. There's no eye of newt, but there might as well be. McCabe traffics in systems of meaning that tie the known world to the greater unknown, using natural materials, toys, slate boards, and countless salvaged items that most people would deem either arcane or headed for the trash.

Each of the pieces in this show, which represents more than 30 years of work, is like a tarot card, dense with symbols. And it's easy to get lost trying to grasp it all. Yet the assemblages, hanging on the wall in glass boxes, are theatrically beautiful and evocative, and they don't require complete understanding to be savored.

Still, the more you know, the more disturbing and rich you may find the content. If McCabe's is a world of dreams, a portion of those dreams are nightmares -- which makes the work so good.

Look at "Malleus." A toy-size iron maiden, the medieval torture device, sits atop the piece's frame. Inside, rhinestones on black slate map out the constellation Andromeda, known in Greek myth as "the chained maiden." McCabe etches images from a 17th-century series of engravings, "The Road to Calvary," into the slate, and highlights them in gold.

A small hand holding a hammer comes out ominously from the side of the box, and red devil prizes from CrackerJack boxes line its floor. The whole piece, dark and glittering, tells stories of extreme punishment and sacrifice.

But McCabe casts a wide net. She shuffles references to Greek myth with Celtic history and game theory. She sees magic and possibility alongside harrowing pitfalls. There's no dogma here -- just the recognition that life is a wheel of fortune, and that we're all bound for both glory and decay.

Maureen McCabe: Shadow Boxes: Assembled Tales of Fate, Magic and Wit
At: Vose Galleries, 238 Newbury St., through July 2. 617-536-6176.
www.vosegalleries.com