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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## Hometown of Utopia and Dissent

By HOLLAND COTTER

**B**OSTON — Americans are experts at two things: saying yes and saying no in very large ways. They said a lot of both early in their history, much of which took place in and around Boston. And that history makes the city a natural choice for political extravaganzas like the Democratic National Convention, which pulls into town next week.

Utopian thought is a visionary version of yes-saying; principled dissent among the most constructive ways of saying no. The two are flip sides of the same coin; together they can bring out the best, and curb the worst, in human behavior. Boston knows all about them. The great refusal that was the American Revolution started here. So did the sublime affirmations of the Transcendentalist movement, referred to by its 19th-century devotees simply as the Newness.

New does not mean pure. In both phenomena, a germ of selfishness — an insistence on entrepreneurial freedom in one case, on self-reliant individualism in the other — was a complicating, spoiling factor. And always in America, abstract ideals are converted too easily to cold, hard cash. The two-finger V-sign that said "peace, man" in the 1960's says Verizon now.

All sorts of ideals, worthy and dubious, workable and impossible, weave through the rich visual culture of Greater Boston. And convention delegates seeking, maybe, a little perspective on election year 2004 can sample their variety just by walking the city's streets, stopping by its museums and galleries, or traveling to towns like Concord and points beyond, where potent, demanding spirits from the past live on and the sparks of new ones stir.

The spirits of old Boston enjoy a particularly vital afterlife in the paintings of John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), on view at two institutions during convention week. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston holds the premier collection of the artist's early portraits of local citizens, among them Revolutionary movers and shapers like John Hancock, Samuel Adams and Paul Revere.

What does the Revolution-in-formation look like through Copley's eyes? At first glance, like a perfectly civilized affair, a trifling matter that might be settled over dinner. The Revolutionary leaders he painted were not, after all, from an impoverished underclass. They were prosperous citizens. Hancock, for example, was a type of colonial yuppie, a dandy in silk-velvet suits. People jokingly nicknamed him King.

Such men had done well under British rule, and some were convinced they would do even better without it. Mingled with their cry for liberty was the sound of coins chinking together in a purse. But the real story was much larger than that, and it had a charge of moral grandeur. The collective rebellion of rich and poor Americans produced a truly remarkable thing: a government based not on a vertical

hierarchy of privilege but on a fluid, horizontal consideration of the needs and desires of citizens, or at least a certain range of citizens.

Copley tried to maintain his distance from the turmoil, but that was impossible. Politics affected his business, and a closer look at his painting reveals his responses to it. On one hand, he produced portraits of local aristocrats like the suave Nicholas Boylston, who had distinctly Loyalist tendencies. On the other, he painted a psychologically penetrating picture of the firebrand activist Samuel Adams and conceived an image of Paul Revere, sitting wigless at his work table, as a republican model of the self-made artisan.

Copley himself was no revolutionary, though. When Loyalists were fleeing Boston, he left too, in 1774, for London. His idea of the best of all possible worlds was the Old World, with its old master art. There, he became what he had always aspired to be: a history painter. And he assumes that elevated role in a small, scholarly exhibition titled "Process and Paradox: The Historical Pictures of John Singleton Copley" at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University in Cambridge.

The focus is on two paintings of scenes from British history. They come toward the end of Copley's career, and his choice of subjects is intriguing. In one picture, Charles I accuses five members of the House of Commons of treason, an event that triggered civil war. In the other James II condemns a rebellious nobleman to death. Kimberly Orcutt, an assistant curator at the Fogg who organized the show, raises the possibility that the antiheroic depictions of monarchs represent the artist's late-found solidarity with the American cause.

But whether or not they do, his finest history painting was already behind him. That was "Watson and the Shark" (1778), done in two versions, one of which is at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the other at the Museum of Fine Arts here. It is about a real event, the rescue of a cabin boy from a shark attack in Havana Harbor in 1749. Its nonreligious, nonclassical, nonmilitary theme looked madly innovative in the context of British academic painting. And it is a very American picture, with its deliberate, folk art-like eye for detail and its pyramid of unglamorously straining bodies surmounted by the figure of a young black man, who looks both as serene as an angel and out of the action.

### **A Growing Black Presence**

At the time this painting was finished, slavery was widespread in the United States; Massachusetts would be the first state to declare it illegal in 1783. By that point, Boston had a growing community of free African-Americans, many of them living on Beacon Hill, where Copley had had a home. In 1806, they built a church of their own there, called the African Meeting House, then in 1835, a school for black children, named for a white philanthropist, Abiel Smith.

Both are now owned by the Museum of Afro-American History, a nonprofit organization that also sponsors public events like Culturefest, the program of music and dance that will take place tomorrow at Boston City Hall Plaza.

Although the meeting house is closed for restoration, the school is open as an exhibition space. And its current show, "Portraits in Black: Gaining Ground, Holding Office," made up of studio portraits by Bachrach Photographers of contemporary African-American politicians in New England, is an apt complement to the Copley portraits seen elsewhere. In addition, there is a small selection of objects from the museum's collection, including a 1773 edition of a book of poems by Phyllis Wheatley and a marble bust of Col. Robert Gould Shaw by the 19th-century African-American sculptor Edmonia Lewis.

## **Heroism Finally Honored**

Shaw was the son of a prominent abolitionist family, and in 1863, at 25, he was appointed commanding officer of the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the first free black troop of the Union Army. That spring, the regiment marched down Beacon Street to the cheers of thousands of well-wishers. Less than two months later, in South Carolina, half of the soldiers, along with Shaw, were killed in battle, their bodies buried in a common grave.

Their story was told, with questionable accuracy, in the 1989 Hollywood film "Glory." And the bronze Shaw memorial by Augustus Saint-Gaudens that is their lasting monument offers distortions of its own. The original design was to depict Shaw alone, until his family insisted that the soldiers be included. Saint-Gaudens complied, and the version installed in 1897 on the edge of Boston Common, across from the State House, has a towering three-dimensional figure of Shaw mounted on a horse, backed by his troops in relief.

The hierarchical disparity of scale is evident at a glance. And while the names of the regiment's white officers were inscribed on the memorial from the start, those of the black soldiers were added only in 1982. "Their monument sticks like a fishbone in the city's throat," the poet Robert Lowell once wrote. So it does: it is a failed tribute to a utopian ideal of racial harmony in one of America's most racially divided cities. It is also, as failed things that aim high often are, incredibly moving.

By the time the 54th Regiment marched through town, abolition had been a burning issue for decades. William Lloyd Garrison had initiated the New England Anti-Slavery Society at the African Meeting House in 1832. Frederick Douglass was a familiar, exhortatory presence there. The Underground Railroad had many stations on Beacon Hill and others in the village of Concord, where Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott and other intellectuals associated with Transcendentalism lived.

## **Disobedient Utopian**

So did Henry David Thoreau, whose refusal to pay taxes to a government that supported slavery cost him a night in the Concord jail and produced "Resistance to Civil Government," better known as "Civil Disobedience," one of the most influential statements of conscientious objection ever written. All that was in 1846, halfway through Thoreau's two-year experiment in self-communal living at Walden Pond.

Like most utopian gestures, this one symbolized a yes and a no, though Emerson, Thoreau's mentor, saw only the no. Thoreau, he said, "was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the state; he ate no flesh; he drank no wine; he never knew the use of tobacco; and though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun." Earlier he had commented that "it is a misfortune of Thoreau's that he has no appetite."

Emerson was wrong. It was true that Thoreau didn't want to possess anything, but he was all appetite, if that can mean a devouring hunger for everything seen, heard, smelled and felt in the natural world. "Walden" is a record of a state of omnivorous contemplation, in which all is absorbed but nothing disturbed.

This summer is the 150th anniversary of its first publication on Aug. 9, 1854, an event observed with subdued celebration. A tiny exhibition at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods, a short distance from the pond, includes one hugely charismatic thing, Thoreau's seventh and final manuscript version of "Walden," on loan from the Huntington Library in California. And a freshly annotated edition of the book, edited by the show's organizer, Jeffrey S. Cramer and published by Yale University Press, will

make an Aug. 9 debut.

Walden Pond itself, rescued from development in the 1990's, is still very much there, a wide, deep basin of dark water set among trees. One side is a heavily used bathing beach, though a path leads to the spot where Thoreau's cabin stood. The bed and desk he used are at the nearby Concord Museum; the cabin site itself is marked by a cairn of stones, placed there, one at a time, by visitors since Bronson Alcott put the first one in place in 1872.

Alcott, like Thoreau, was one of the outstanding social visionaries of his time. And like Thoreau, he lived his ideas. After doing experimental research in the training of children, he resolved to establish a perfect community with like-minded friends. They acquired an isolated farmhouse, which they called Fruitlands, outside the town of Harvard, where Alcott took his wife, Abigail, and their four young daughters, one of whom was Louisa May, to live in 1843.

The residents — or "Con-Sociate Family," as they called themselves — observed dietary restrictions similar to Thoreau's but with piquant variations. Vegetables that grew down into the earth, like potatoes and radishes, were categorically shunned. One Fruitlander later acquired a certain renown for eating nothing but crackers for one year and nothing but apples for the next. Like the Shakers, who had a community at Harvard, their goal was to live off the fruits of the land and their labor, though a portion of each day was also set aside for conversation and speculative thought.

All went well enough for a few months, though an unprogrammed division of labor soon took shape: the women did the work; the men did the thinking. Alcott himself disappeared on periodic and unannounced recruiting tours. Halfway through the bitter first winter, for which inadequate food and firewood had been set aside, Abigail Alcott and her daughters moved out, and the experiment effectively ended.

The farmhouse, in its photogenic hillside setting, is now part of a parklike museum complex and holds a few souvenirs of the Alcotts' stay, along with Thoreau's mineral collection. A Shaker building was moved to a nearby site early in the last century, and separate galleries were erected for 19th-century paintings and an American Indian display. The latter includes yet another piece of Thoreauviana, an arrowhead he collected.

Although Thoreau is a canonic presence in the American consciousness now, this wasn't always so. Long influential among political thinkers from Mohandas K. Gandhi and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., for whom "Civil Disobedience" was scripture, it was only in the 1960's, in the charged atmosphere of war resistance and environmental consciousness, that he achieved a pop stardom. Alcott, by comparison, remains obscure, though he too might be seen as a progenitor of a radical utopian counterculture.

### **Exalting the 60's Spirit**

How these two men might have reacted to the aestheticization of the 60's countercultural spirit, evident in certain art at present, is a question. New York has seen a fair amount of such art, and a survey of the work of the artist Kai Althoff at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston could be taken as a European example of the trend.

Mr. Althoff, born in Cologne, Germany, in 1966, is fluent in several visual media, as well as in music. (He founded a band called Workshop.) Largely self-taught, he is a hunter-gatherer sort of artist, pulling in material from many sources. The sinister narratives spun out in his paintings, film and installations

incorporate references to German fairy tales, Gothic art, hippie-era psychedelia, punk, children's drawings, album cover art, fashion, cultural history and a freewheeling mysticism that incorporates Hindu deities but that has a clear Christian bias.

In all, or much, of this, he is reminiscent of the American artist Paul Thek (1933-1988), who lived and exhibited in Cologne, Germany, in the 1960's and 70's and whose work is on permanent view in the diocesan museum there. Like Thek's art, Mr. Althoff's has a strong collaborative component. And like Thek's best known installation, "The Tomb: Death of a Hippie" (1967), it comments critically and nostalgically on a utopian adventure that didn't work but that has not been abandoned.

Where other new art in a similar vein feels thin, Mr. Althoff's has a density and an idiosyncratic moral weight that holds interest, at least when presented in total environment form, as it is in this show, organized by Nicholas Baume, chief curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art. But more generally, it will be interesting to see how the current retro-60'sism, stylistically erudite but politically evasive, plays out.

### **A Farce and a Crapshoot**

The political nature of "Participatory Democracy," at an alternative space called Art Interactive in Cambridge, isn't evasive at all. Organized by George Fifield, curator of new media at the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Mass., and timed to coincide with the convention, it presents the election process as a farce and freedom of choice as a crapshoot.

The show is set up as a carnivalesque polling station. Candidates on the ballot include Two-Headed Ed, who sees both sides of any argument; "The Contortionist," who can wrap himself around any issue; and "The Great Incumbo." Visitors cast votes by dart-throwing and ball-tossing, under the supervision of the artists who collaborated on the show, among them Ravi Jain, Natalie Loveless, Jeff Warmouth, Andrew M. K. Warren and Douglas R. Weathersby. Whatever the voting method, the Great Incumbo, represented by the image of a huge grasping hand, is overwhelmingly favored.

### **Art or Terrorism?**

Far west of Boston, the hand of Big Brother looms over an ambitious political show titled "The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere" at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, where an installation by the Critical Art Ensemble, a highly regarded collective, is conspicuously missing.

On the night of May 11, a few days before the opening, one of the collective's members, Steven Kurtz, called 911 to report that his wife had had a fatal heart attack at their home in Buffalo. A medic who responded spotted what appeared to be scientific paraphernalia in the apartment and suspected bioterrorist activity. The medic alerted the F.B.I, which impounded the material under the Patriot Act. Mr. Kurtz is now awaiting trial on charges of mail fraud and illegally obtaining biological substances.

Among the things the F.B.I. took was a Conceptual art project, titled "Free Range Grain," in the form of a laboratory to test for genetically modified organisms in food. The collective, which describes itself as doing "independent experimental research for anti-capitalist resistance movements," had already presented the piece in Europe. At Mass MoCA, they had planned to invite visitors to bring food advertised as organic for testing. The piece was meant to be instructive, gently empowering, and fun.

Most of the work by 28 other collectives and artists in the show can be described the same way. Where

political art in the 1990's favored polemics, recent work is inclined to be investigatory, practical and persuasive rather than insistent, even entertaining. Artists like Lucy Orta and Michael Rakowitz, for example, design cheap, portable shelters for the homeless. The God Bless Graffiti Coalition, based in Chicago, delivers political information by plastering public space reserved for consumer advertising with eye-catching wheatpaste posters.

An installation by the feminist collective subRosa is more Conceptual: it traces social and political connections between women who once worked in the factory building that now houses Mass MoCA and others who work for the same company in Mexico today. The architectural collective Spurse uses a similar north-south model to demonstrate that urbanism is the new natural order, one that renders nation states obsolete. William Pope.L's "Black Factory," a collaboration with Spurse, turns the production of art about racial difference into a madcap cottage-industry.

Still other contributions are action-based, adopting forms from street theater and lectures to shoplifting and pie-throwing, to say what they have to say. Such ephemeral art is documented on video and in a neat exhibition catalog, edited by Nato Thompson, the Mass MoCA curator who organized the show, and by the artist and historian Gregory Sholette.

Is lightening up the way to go in political art? War and terrorism have made the world a seriously dangerous place. And the homeland isn't feeling all that secure either. The words of the essayist Randolph Bourne, written about America nearly a century ago, don't seem far wrong today: "With our deep-seated distrust of social equality, our genius for race-prejudice, our inarticulateness and short-sightedness, it seems highly probable that we shall evolve away from democracy instead of towards it." At the same time, from early in our history, we have had an alternative tradition of visionary thinking and refusenik action. That tradition is all over our art, and is ready and waiting to be tapped in this election year.