

## The whiff of art

By **GREG COOK** | March 3, 2009

Wherever the Japanese-raised, Brooklyn-based artist Misaki Kawai goes, she seems to trail twinkling pixie dust. For her previous Boston show, in 2007, she filled the Institute of Contemporary Art with her exuberant dollhouse space station. In "Kung Fu Forest" at LaMontagne Gallery (555 East Second Street, South Boston, through March 28), she offers a dozen endearing Cute Brut paintings and three sculptures of lumberjacks, birds kissing, people and a dog paddling down a green river, and guys kicking each other in the groin. I can't decide whether my favorite is the one of the two kids walking and holding hands with the bear in the green tank top and shorts or the one of the wall-eyed, gun-toting green Rambo guy in an orange jumpsuit. Kawai adopts a *faux* idiot-savant style — her characters look like something a second-grader scrawled, done up in bright acid colors on dumb-ass expressionist backgrounds. Her people and critters remind me of Gumby and his pals — blank-eyed, bizarre, stretchy, and wonderful.

In contrast, Dorchester sculptor and conceptual artist Andrew Mowbray turns LaMontagne's back gallery (also through March 28) into an austere white-on-white cell filled with artifacts (that he's made) displayed with museum-style labels.

A couple of photos show him pouring wine onto the sidewalk outside the Museum of Fine Arts, "paying tribute to the objects contained within the museum collections." His re-creation of an iconic, spare Arts and Crafts *Morris Chair* by Gustav Stickley stands on a lit-from-within pedestal. A couple of lit-up cases on the wall display remarkable re-creations of ancient arrowheads and stone tools.

These and the chair are fashioned from cut, carved, and routed white polyethylene. (Think: synthetic kitchen cutting boards.) Mowbray is a master craftsman, but his content doesn't always live up to his formal chops. His hair-cutting-and-fishing-fly-tying performance inside an Art Nouveau diving bell (that he'd beautifully crafted) at Space Other in 2007 was a mysterious meditation on masculinity, and one of the best local shows of that year. But his focus here on museum culture feels insular and dull.

Still, there's potential in his ruminations on handcraft via the chair and arrowheads. The Arts and Crafts Movement was a 19th-century return to craft as a rejection of the dehumanizing Industrial Revolution. Our current crafty movement (which includes traditional knitting or embroidery turned to fine-art ends) reflects a similar effort to come to terms with all our digital, synthetic, manufactured stuff. Mowbray's sculptures nod toward both sides of this split; they're so expertly handmade, they look like something extruded from a machine. Big ideas are lurking here, but the sculptures don't yet embody them.