

WEATHER REPORTS

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LANDSCAPE NOSTALGIA, PLUS CLIMATE, THE NATURE OF COMMUNITY,
AND DRAWING SHOW #21

BY GREG COOK

"JOE WARDWELL: DIE YOUNG"

LAMONTAGNE GALLERY, 555 EAST SECOND ST.
SOUTH BOSTON | THROUGH OCTOBER 10.

"ANDREW MOWBRAY: TEMPEST PROGNOSTICATOR"

DECORDOVA SCULPTURE PARK + MUSEUM, 51
SANDY POND ROAD, LINCOLN | THROUGH JANUARY 3

"BRIAN KNEP: EXEMPLA"

TUFTS UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, 40R TALBOT AVE.
MEDFORD | THROUGH NOVEMBER 15

"DRAWINGS THAT WORK: 21ST DRAWING SHOW"

MILLS GALLERY, BOSTON CENTER FOR THE ARTS,
539 TREMONT ST, BOSTON | THROUGH OCTOBER 25

One of the great themes in America is nostalgia for the "good old days," which flame into being and then fade into the distance. It's the anxiety that we've just missed the cool party, that paradise has been lost. And it's twinned with the idea that you better rush out and seize the day, because tomorrow it will all be over.

It's often been tied to nature. It courses through the American landscapes of the 19th-century Hudson River School painters, canvases filled with nostalgia for a wild, "pure" America that the artists fear is being eaten up by the Industrial Revolution. It percolates through 19th-century Transcendentalism, as when Henry David Thoreau dashes into the Concord woods in the 1850s to "learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

It's what F. Scott Fitzgerald is talking about at the end of *The Great Gatsby* when he writes that "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us." It's what Neil Young sings about: "It's better to burn out than fade away."

It's that theme — racing forward to get to the paradise in the rear-view mirror — that Boston painter Joe Wardwell taps in "Die Young" at LaMontagne Gallery. The canvases show rock lyrics (Black Sabbath, Slayer, Def Leppard) flaming across romantic landscapes — pictures like the bastard children of swooning Hudson River School scenes and swaggering rock-album covers.

Burn Out has the title in flaming blue



EXPAND Brian Knep's interactive projections offer simple pleasures that resonate.

and gold lettering floating in front of green surf crashing over rocks under a stormy sky. Wardwell paints with expressionist verve. The waves are built from lots of short, rushing strokes splashed with paint drips. The title seems to correspond to the crashing, disintegrating wave, and to amplify it.

Sometimes Wardwell's composition is off the mark, as when he lines everything up on center. And the neon words — which vary from ornate circus script to blocky B-horror-movie letters — mask some clunkiness in his landscape rendering. But then you see the glowing sunset over a mountain lake in *Fade Away*. The title floats in front of the scene in letters that shift from yellow to orange, rhyming with the disappearing light. It inspires a particularly acute heartache.

➤ For Andrew Mowbray's new show at the DeCordova Sculpture Park + Museum, "Tempest Prognosticator," the Dorchester conceptual artist sculpts giant, ornate, neo-Victorian weathervanes and an anemometer (that spinning-cup device

that measures wind speed) out of white polyethylene (a plastic often used in cutting boards). The pieces look like Jules Verne designs manufactured by Matthew Barney.

Mowbray's subject is the futility of trying to predict the weather. A video shows him on a rooftop strapped into the anemometer, or clinging to the large plastic weathervane (displayed in the next room), and standing on a lazy susan spinning in the breeze.

Five drawings produced by a weathervane-driven drawing machine that he constructed hang on the walls. They look like drunken Spirograph sketches. On the DeCordova's roof, Mowbray has installed a larger — though not as handsomely ornate — weathervane-driven drawing machine. The wind spins a pen across and up and down paper mounted inside a barrel. The result is a scribbly tangle of lines, mostly gathered at the top of the page.

No question that Mowbray is great with his

hands. But can his ideas match his terrific craftsmanship and his neat gadgets? I appreciate the Mr. Bean-style gag of a man as a giant weathervane. All the same, the best conceptual art sows new, surprising ideas that sprout in your head. Mowbray's interaction with the wind — the spinning artist, the random scribble drawings — halts at what you already know.



FADEAWAY Joe Wardwell's paintings are like the bastard children of swooning Hudson River School scenes and swaggering rock-album cover