

Crafty gauges of daily phenomena Sculptor 's baskets carry data about weather patterns

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | April 23, 2008

Sculptor and meteorology geek Nathalie Miebach brings her two passions together in her art. She makes sculptures that chart data about precipitation, tides, daylight hours, and phases of the moon. "Changing Weather," her exhibit at Nielsen Gallery, gathers such information from Maine and Provincetown, where she's been a fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center for the last two years.

Miebach doesn't preach about or politicize weather patterns. She observes them and makes art out of them, and with so much keen attention being paid to climate change, her interest is timely. She maps most of her data with little dowels, flags, and wooden balls on grids she makes of woven reeds - that is, baskets. For this show, she also added a couple of wall-mounted pinwheels that the viewer can spin.

The works, in a palette of bold colors, enchant in more than one way: They convey information about weather, which we all deal with daily, in a format that ties the ancient craft of basketry to present-day construction toys.

Miebach's real challenge is in getting all that data to work for her aesthetically. Sometimes it coalesces, and sometimes it overwhelms. Miebach gives each classification of data a different symbol, and all the flags, balls, and networks of crisscrossing reeds and dowels can be too much to read. It's a challenge to orchestrate all that information into an elegant form.

"Barometric Pressure: Herring Cove, Cape Cod" starts out solidly enough, with a red basket base, but the more you pay attention to which dowel denotes wind speed and which indicates air temperature, the more cluttered and confusing the basket's contents become.

The baskets entice with their often undulating shapes, and when Miebach evenly distributes her data around a central woven form, her work is most aesthetically effective.

"Temporal Warmth: Tango Between Air, Land, and Sea," a central vortex with a net of blue dowels charting the air stream around it, looks like a terrifying roller coaster ride. It evokes the swell and fall of waves and the moving, organic force of weather patterns. This piece doesn't simply boggle our minds with information or please (or baffle) us with a complex structure. It actually conjures the weather. ■

