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Having Our Say

Let there be lumens

By **Charles Bonenti**
Article Last Updated: 08/08/2008 08:31:15 AM EDT

Sunday, August 10
Through last week's rain, I saw light in North Adams. Or I should say — *lumens*.

Lumens are measurements of the perceived power of light.

"Lumens" is also the name of an exhibition about lights — and about connections — at the MCLA Gallery 51 Annex on Main Street, at Greylock Arts in Adams and online at Turbulence.org.

On view throught Oct. 31, it's one of the most inventive shows around this summer.

MCLA Gallery 51 is the storefront artspace at 51 Main St. supported by Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts as an adjunct to its arts-studies program. The annex a few doors down, is a new temporary space turned over to the three local artists who designed "Lumens."

Like the "MySpace Show" mounted at Gallery 51 last December, it spans of real and virtual space. This way of showing art is something we are going to see a lot more of in the future

Unlike the MySpace Show, which showcased Gallery 51's MySpace friends, "Lumens" reaches out into the North Berkshire community.

When you go through it, you actually feel a real time and a nostalgic connection with people living here. That feeling is conveyed by, of all things, a display of table and floor lamps.

In putting the show together, artists Matthew Belanger, Sean Riley and Ven Voisey put out a call last May to borrow

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... putting the show together, artist Matthew Bonenti, Dean Frey and Tom Voisey put out a call for may to borrow lamps from homes and businesses around North Berkshire. They took in about 150.

They

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also collected the owners' stories about the lamps and posted them, along with schematic images of each lamp, as a virtual gallery on turbulence.org.

You can see that gallery as you read this column by going to www.turbulence.org/works/newadams/lumens.

Working with Tom Igoe, a professor of interactive telecommunication at New York University, the artists devised a way, using sensors, to make the lamps in the galleries light up when visitors physically approach them or read about them online.

The idea, Voisey said in a statement when the show opened July 10, was to explore the metaphorical links between Adams and North Adams and the personal histories that make them what they are.

Put another way, the objects say something about the tastes and values of the people who make up these two towns

The installation in the annex — the vacant Sports Corner storefront — is deceptively ordinary. The lamps, which look like junk shop finds, are arrayed on the floor in the darkened showroom. A center aisle leads a visitor to a computer monitor at the back of the room.

That's it: No labels, no wall texts. You may not even believe you're in an art show.

But then, one or a few lamps will glow briefly because you've approached it, or a visitor in Adams has approached a corresponding lamp cluster there (both shows are similarly laid out) or because someone, anywhere in the world, is reading about that particular lamp online.

Even if you can't see or hear them, you "feel" the presence of other people through these brief illuminations in a ghostly, but oddly reassuring way.

At the computer monitor, it's easy to scroll through the schematic lamp images and read what the owners had to say about them.

Mostly, the stories are ordinary ones, written anonymously by ordinary people about these ordinary household objects — a first apartment lamp, a cast-off from in-laws, a tag-sale find. But some are touchingly thoughtful or sentimental. And the stories invest the lamps with value beyond any monetary or artistic worth.

Maybe that's why so many of us are drawn to antiques — as much for their real or imagined pedigrees and for the way the look or the purpose they serve.

I could have spent an afternoon researching each of the lamps I saw.

The show is not without its flaws

Technology can be balky (Isn't it always?). The lamps sometimes don't light up when they're supposed to; the "lumens" page on the turbulence.org Web site was down when I checked as I wrote this last week; and numbers of the schematics I looked at online are still awaiting write-ups a month after the show opened.

Then the oddest-looking lamps seem to have been loaned mostly by collectors, or else adapted by artists. And that strikes a false — or maybe just out-of-tune — note.

Unlike the lamps given by ordinary homeowners, these objects have no "family history," no genuine connection to the domestic life of the community. They were, instead, purchased or invented in the moment as objects of visual or cultural interest.

Finally, a small but needless inconvenience: The computer screen at Gallery 51 faces the display of lamps, putting them behind the viewer's back. I had to turn around each time I wanted to compare an image on the screen with a lamp on the floor.

Despite these faults, "Lumens" manages to stretch our thinking about art and the nature of exhibitions. And that is, well ... illuminating.

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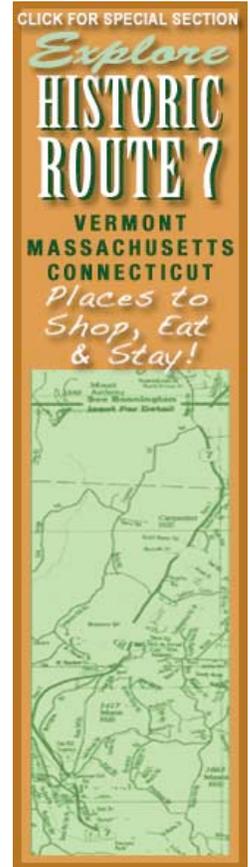
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