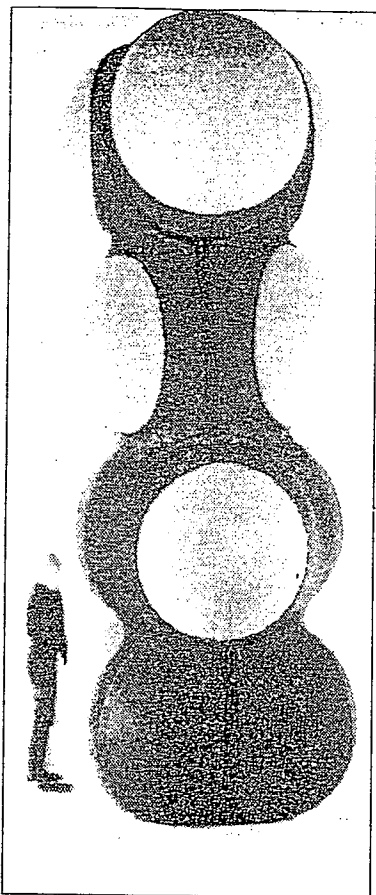


PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Art By Edward F. Sozanski



"Dulcinea" is a 1999 Nancy Davidson inflated sculpture, 16 feet of warm air encased in latex and fabric, on exhibit at ICA.

If David Graham makes you snicker, then Nancy Davidson, whose show at ICA, "Breathless," runs concurrently, will make you chuckle. Her inflated sculptures are genuinely funny, and intended to be so, but they're also subversive.

You think Davidson is just playing around with pretty balloons, but she's really digging into the implied masculinity of sculptural forms and media, and challenging generalizations about gender in art.

Sculptures as massive as hers — *Dulcinea* is 16 feet high, and *Carnivaleyes* is an array 12 feet high by nearly 14 wide — are usually heavy and solid, but hers are neither. Their mass is an illusion, literally nothing but warm air.

Davidson's sculptures are made of latex weather balloons. She uses two sizes, which inflate fully to 5½ and 8½ feet in diameter, respectively. But she doesn't inflate them all the way. They need to be a bit soft, because she binds them with ropes and cinches them with enormous corsets to create suggestive bulges and curves.

Davidson's sculptures are the three-dimensional, abstract equivalent of Renoir's "pneumatic nudes." They evoke zaftiness with such élan that one could easily miss the underlying feminist agenda. In her choice of colors, at least, Davidson is resolutely gender neutral: She uses blue as well as pink balloons (and yellow, green and white, too).

The sculptures come in several formats. Seven *Budlettes*, which resemble giant artificial flowers — peonies and water lilies come to mind — cluster at the entrance to the upstairs gallery. Each is just a balloon girded with black rope so it resembles a round cheese, and hung from a black steel "stem."

The *Budlettes* establish the appropriate mood immediately. The visitor knows that this artist is not only inventive — her materials, after all, couldn't be more basic — but witty.

Just beyond is *Neither Bigugly Nor Smallnice*, a huge blue hanging piece that sports ropelike, white cot-

ton "pigtails" that transform it into a head. Nearby is *Bluemoon*, another big blue balloon squeezed around the middle by a white fabric band. You think, corset on a fat lady. But it could be a fat man; they wear corsets, too.

In the high gallery, Davidson has four larger and more elaborate pieces. *Dulcinea*, named for Don Quixote's dream girl, is a four-balloon stack held together with black mesh. It's a push-pull piece in which the bulges play against the constrictions, a play on Brancusi's far more rigid and iconic *Endless Column*.

Carnivaleyes is an assemblage of 12 units in various colors, four high by three wide. Each balloon, cinched at the middle and fitted out with fabric cutouts and coverings, resembles a pair of eyes. Davidson has placed them to "gaze" around the room, like silent voyeurs.

Spinderella, sited in a corner, is a hanging piece that suggests a spider web. *Hang 'em High* covers the largest area, a whole corner of the room, but it's conceptually simple — an orange net envelops a large red balloon, transforming it into the suggestion of a stripper's buttocks.

You can put that allusion aside if you like, because, strictly in formal terms, this is a captivating piece. The taut net and the suspended balloon conquer the space by suggesting gravitational equilibrium.

Davidson's work combines the cheekiness of a young artist (she's in her 50s) with the sure-handedness of a veteran. The work is elemental, but it's right on target in all its permutations, a wonderful thing to behold.