

ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS

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ASPEN MAYS CHICAGO

Fireflies' lights glow yellow-green if you capture them on film with a four-by-five camera. And if you crack open a Magic 8 Ball and photograph it, as in *Dissection of a Magic 8 Ball*, 2008, the mysterious blue liquid inside resembles a slice of outer space. Aspen Mays shows us wonders such as these in her first solo show, *Concentrate and Ask Again* [Golden Gallery; June 19–August 2, 2009]. Using photography and video to document her experiments, Mays acts as both an amateur scientist and explorer. Her work stands in deft opposition to the technology that we've come to rely on for answers—iPhones mapping our routes from point A to B, Google's rewiring of our brains to think in terms of keyword searches—putting faith not in complex databases and rapidly evolving technology, but rather in the ability of everyday objects and materials to spark our imagination.

In *The Future of the Future (Spaceman)*, 2009, an eerie, tin-foiled spaceman stands in a room covered with the same material. There's no face inside the shiny silver cardboard-box helmet. Instead, like the carnival prop that allows people to play the character painted on the opposite side by sticking their heads through a hole, anyone looking at this photograph places him- or herself in an otherworldly space, and prepares for lift-off.

Flight occurs in Mays' *Larry*, 2008, a video homage to Larry Walters, a.k.a. Lawn Chair Larry, who attached forty-five helium-filled weather balloons to his Sears lawn chair and soared to an astounding sixteen thousand feet above the Earth. Mays constructs a mini-version of Larry's chair, ties five balloons to it, and then attaches it to a high-altitude balloon that amateur scientists from Chicago's Adler Planetarium launch into the atmosphere. She charts its journey, from blast off in the middle of Midwestern farmland to the deep blue of "near space"—nearly ninety-six thousand feet above Earth—a place that, perhaps not so coincidentally, resembles *Dissection of a Magic 8 Ball*. Winds jerk the miniature replica about, instilling a sense of adventure into the valiant flight of this small object; at some point, one of its little balloons bursts, sending millions of rubber bits zipping through the atmosphere. In her show, Mays preserves the lawn chair artifact by placing it inside a thick glass case, imparting a sense of importance—and humor—to an otherwise insignificant object.

Continuing her exploration of the Magic 8 Ball, Mays dismembers the twenty-sided icosahedron die she finds inside of it, then cuts and flattens it into the shape of Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion map. She photographs the die's white triangles with their vague, cheeky answers molded onto the surface—"cannot predict now," "outlook good," and "concentrate and ask again"—and places them on top of a clean white piece of paper, creating a crisp, three-dimensional effect. The piece is aptly titled *Map of the World (after Buckminster Fuller)*, 2008. Like the Dymaxion map, Mays' map has no right side up; as such, the artist reflects on Fuller's idea of looking at the Earth in myriad ways despite scientific advancements to accurately map every inch of it.

Mays' ambitious solo show comprises a rich body of conceptually poignant work, demonstrating the artistic abilities of a bold emerging talent who happily treads into the unknown. Will we see more of Mays' work? One shake of the Magic 8 Ball says, "As I see it, yes."

—Alicia Eler