

Above your head

By Ronni Reich
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Garlands of berries, flowers and leaves dangle from exposed scaffolding and thick silver pipes.

It looks as if a garden or a jungle has sprung from the ceiling.

And then, it's clear something more unusual has blossomed: Little men hang among outsize replicas of pea pods and glistening pears. Across from skulls and a crab claw, exotic bulbous forms resembling hives catch the eye, splattered in bright pink, blue and green.

At Grounds for Sculpture, Ming Fay's "Canutopia" (the name comes from "canopy" plus "utopia") has taken over the newly opened 10,000-square-foot East Gallery. The exhibition leads a quartet of spring/summer exhibitions opening tomorrow, but Fay's site-specific creation could be called the main event.

"It's a passage into a place, a fantasy, an ideal that never really exists," Fay says of the largest solo exhibition of his career.

Fay has had an unconventional space to fill at the sculpture park. There's nothing on the floor, as the gallery will be used for concerts and events this summer. But the ceiling, the angled accordion walls and shelves throughout the room teem with flora in an exploration of the relationship between man and nature.

Life blooms throughout "Canopy" but artifacts of decay abound as well, with a wishbone and battered seashells mounted like hunters' trophies. Fay shows the life cycle of his plants and animals, with jumbo versions of a puckered, grooved peach pit and a winged maple "helicopter" seed among his sculptures.

"He loves things that hold the beginning of growth that look so ... well they're not that inviting but they hold so much potential," says curator Virginia Oberlin Steel.

The collection is vast, composed largely of sculptures made from wire structures covered in papier-mâché, paint and spray foam that surround the viewer.

"You look up and you see this work, and it reflects back and forth with the works on the side that make the whole environment a unique package," Fay says.

The exhibition spans 30 years of Fay's career. Born in Shanghai, the artist grew up in Hong Kong and moved to the United States when he was 18. Now 69, he has lived in New York since the early '70s. He maintains a studio there and one in Jersey City, and is a professor at William Paterson University.

"He's really an artist of note who maybe hasn't gotten his due," Steel says.

At first glance, the exhibition can appear to be a collection of mad mobiles forged of subjects suited to a still life

painting. But Fay infuses it with humor — a peanut incongruously suspended within a cluster of flowers, the few small men sprinkled among the forest — and symbolism.

For example, in Chinese folklore, oranges represent wealth and good fortune, and cherries represent love and female sexuality.

And with works drawn from his series "Monkey Pots" — inspired by a South American tree with nuts so enticing that primates get their heads stuck inside trying to get them — Fay creates a metaphor for those trapped by desires. The pieces' radioactive colors and "mutated" shapes have a basis in science fiction films.

As for the proportion of the people, from the standpoint of Eastern philosophy, Fay points out, a person is just a part of nature. The artist's work often deals with the tension between that idea and the tendency of man to try to conquer and manipulate the world around him.

"There are all kinds of things embedded ... there's poison in it, and there's good, there's bad, and there's death and there's life," Fay says.

"It's a mix of everything just like the real world," Fay says. "We're facing a constant change, only here, it's in mythological terms."

Three more exhibits to explore

"E Pluribus Unum" by Willie Cole, born in Somerville and raised in Newark, marks both a continuation of the artist's use of mass-produced, cast-off materials and a shift in perspective.

"Downtown Goddess" shows one of his signatures — use of footwear. Women's high heels are scrunched, folded and cast in brass, with a pair of baby shoes at the bottom to form a kind of totem, a nod to African sculpture.

By contrast, in new pieces, Cole uses objects that don't have the same personal significance — you can imagine walking in someone else's stilettos, but plastic water bottles are anonymous. In "H2O," Cole assembles bottles to form a car — a commentary on waste, pollution and oil dependence. In the exhibition's title piece, he builds a chandelier, with images of Buddha floating in each cylinder.

"True or False" by Sharon Engelstein, is a collection of "biomorphic" massive vinyl and nylon sculptures

conceived with computer-aided design software and realized by a blimp maker. Fans zip inside to give the impression that the inflatables are breathing.

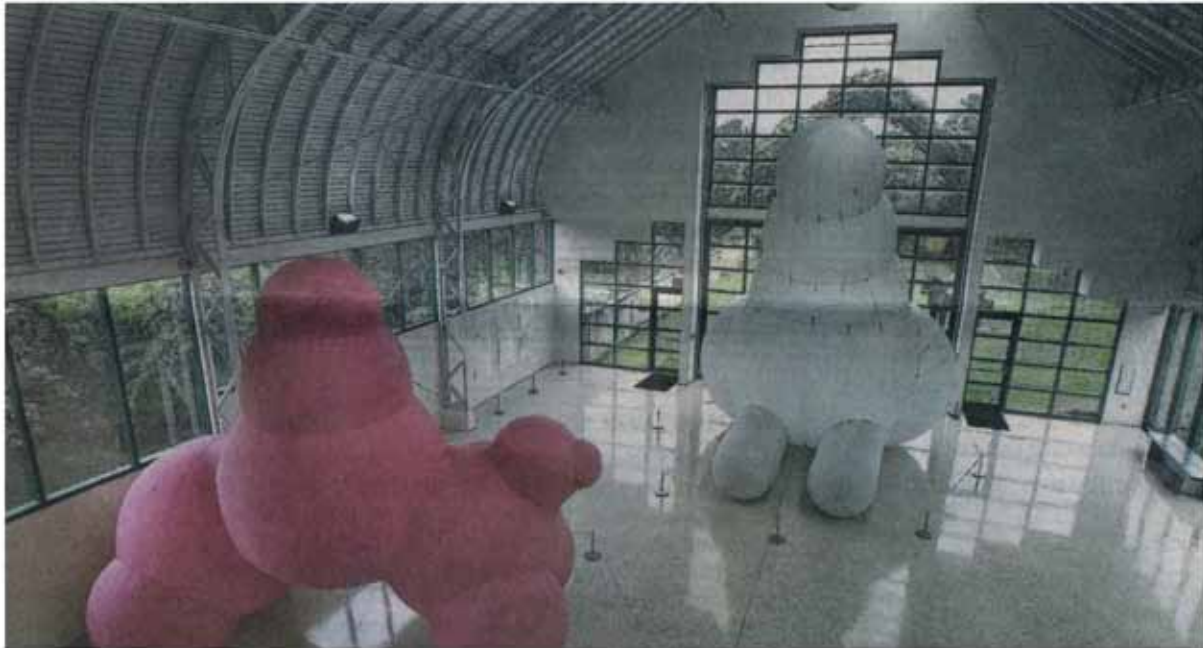
"She was interested in creating these organic forms that had kind of a machine abstraction to them," curator Virginia Oberlin Steel says.

Like Fay's exhibition, the folk-art-tinged "Natural Curiosities" by Marilyn Keating focuses on the outdoors and childhood memories. Her woodcarvings, garden sculptures studded with mosaics and kites take on subjects such as fish, butterflies and dead birds. "What hums in you?" Keating has carved alongside an image of a cicada, fitting in with a theme that Steel has cultivated for the season.

"We were really looking to incite people's curiosity," Steel says.



A detail of "E Pluribus Unum" by artist Willie Cole at Grounds for Sculpture.



Top: "Canutopia" by artist Ming Fay.
 Above: Sharon Engelstein's exhibit called "True of False."
 Right: Marilyn Keating's exhibit called "Natural Curiosities." All are on display at Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton.
 ANDREW MILLS/THE STAR-LEDGER





'Canutopia' exhibition covers gallery's ceiling and walls at Grounds for Sculpture