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## On the wild side

The Boston Globe

Video artist and performer cherish humor, playfulness, and risk-taking in their work



Ann Carlson (left) and Mary Ellen Strom are the creators of "Meadowlark" (on screen), one of the videos in an upcoming exhibit at the DeCordova Museum. (Essdras M Suarez/Globe Staff)

By Cate McQuaid

Globe Correspondent / January 23, 2009

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Mary Ellen Strom and Ann Carlson are buzzing with excitement. They have just gotten their hands on the catalog for their new show, "Carlson/Strom: New Performance Video" at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park.



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### CARLSON/STROM: New Performance Video

At: DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln,  
 Tuesday through May 17.  
 781-259-8355,  
[www.decordova.org](http://www.decordova.org)

"Oh, look, honey, that's nice," Strom says to Carlson. She points at a still from "Madame 710," a video in which Carlson, clad only in a clear plastic raincoat patchily stuffed with dollar bills, dances with and around a cow, to a soundtrack of Mozart. The image presents a strangely satisfying juxtaposition of the cow's backside and Carlson's front, from shoulders to shins.

"She has cute legs, doesn't she?" Strom asks. Of course, she's talking about Carlson.

Strom, a video artist, and Carlson, a choreographer and performer, are partners in life and art. Their DeCordova show comprises five video works, including two installations - "Madame 710" and their newest piece, "Meadowlark," commissioned by the DeCordova and videotaped on the North Cheyenne Reservation in Montana.

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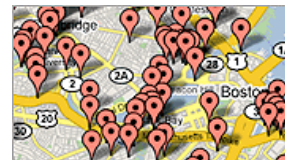
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All the works are witty, some are laugh-out-loud funny, and they can be politically pointed and mournful. The videos are steeped in art history and theory - themes that Carlson and Strom toss around in conversation with gusto. The pair have a national reputation, and they share a passion for research, a taste for artistic risk-taking, a commitment to social justice, and an attitude of playful exuberance.

There's a festive atmosphere in the artists' South End studio as they warmly welcome a visitor with grapes, trail mix, spicy chocolate, and ginger tea. Both are small women, dressed entirely in black, with dramatically blue-rimmed eyeglasses. They have set up a dry run of the "Meadowlark" installation.

The piece, with six monitors set in a circle to echo the effect of 19th-century cyclorama murals, explores romantic visions of the American West and such contemporary issues as environmental degradation. Carlson appears with Cheyenne artist Bently Spang on horseback, hidden beneath a buffalo hide (in an echo of Frederic Remington's 1908 painting "Indians Simulating Buffalo"), and then stumbling naked through the fire-charred landscape. With its unfurling Western vistas, the piece is gorgeous and elegiac.

"There are coal reserves under the land on the Cheyenne reservation, but the people don't own the resources under the land," Strom says. She and Carlson own a cabin nearby. "I imagine the mountaintop there I know so well," Carlson says, "and it keeps this softness in me about the earth. We're playing with that longing for the landscape."

A photographer arrives to take the couple's picture. Many artists don't like having the camera turned on them, but Strom and Carlson are prepared: They have set up a blue-sky backdrop in the studio, and before the shoot, they dash together to the ladies' room.

"We just have to control our lipstick," Carlson explains.

In front of the camera, it turns out the video artist, rather than the performer, is the bigger ham. Strom grabs her partner and kicks up her heels, then Carlson joins in the fun.

There's more fun on view in their work "Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg and Moore," which stars four lawyers comically strutting through a dance Carlson choreographed based on their ordinary movements. Her fascination with everyday gesture plays a big part in many Carlson/Strom video pieces.

"This fusion of the genres of dance and video breaks and opens both genres by bringing them together," says DeCordova assistant curator Dina Deitsch, who organized the show.

The exhibit also "achieves a lot of goals for the museum," says the DeCordova's new executive director, Dennis Kois, who then ticks off those goals: to show local artists of national caliber, to step up its commitment to new media, and to commission original work.

Strom and Carlson met 20 years ago at an opening for a mutual friend, choreographer David Dorfman, in New York.

"David called me at the last minute, asking me to pick up the wine and cheese," recalls Strom. She has straight blond hair that brushes at her collar as she talks animatedly. "Anne came early."

"I always come early," Carlson says, shrugging. Her hair is close to white, a soft, short pouf around her face.

At the time, Carlson was working on a performance called "Scared Goats Faint"

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and was looking for a place to keep the goats.

"She said, 'do you have a backyard?' " Strom remembers. Strom couldn't help her there, but she knew Carlson's work, and a conversation sparked.

"Then she asked me to take her out on her birthday," Strom says, smiling at the memory. "And I knew."

The couple and their three children - 15-year-old twins Joseph and Daniel, and 14-year-old daughter Nora - moved to Jamaica Plain three years ago, after years in Los Angeles and New York. They wanted to be closer to Strom's teaching job at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts.

The two both have their own careers, but they seem to have found a way to work together seamlessly, throwing themselves into in-depth research, complicated logistics, and execution.

"M.E. is really, besides brilliant intellectually, she's fearlessly gamey. She will go anywhere. I get this idea, and she says, 'OK, let's go,' " Carlson says.

Strom, in turn, points to Carlson's strong values: "She has an integrity in terms of the meaning of the work, how it gets exhibited, the care she takes and the consciousness she has of the people she works with."

Of course, for the three-channel video "Madame 710," Carlson was working with a Holstein. The cow, named Gerri, came from Great Brook Farm in Carlisle. In the video, Carlson encounters her in what looks like a white-box art gallery.

The piece, a critique of agribusiness, is also a feminist revision of Joseph Beuys's 1974 performance "I Like America and America Likes Me," in which Beuys closed himself into a gallery with a coyote, a felt blanket, and a stack of newspapers for several days.

The pair doesn't shrink from the feminist label. "We've never been afraid of the F word," declares Strom. "It would be hard to find a non-feminist out lesbian." She elaborates later in an e-mail: "The themes of gender liberation are ever present in the work," she writes. "They are foregrounded, embedded, act as a spine and foundation."

In the case of "Madame 710," the feminism is infused with humor. (The title refers to - among other things - the number tagged on the cow's ear and the French court style of dance Carlson performs.) The piece was the cow's first foray away from her home pasture, to a ground-floor studio in Hyde Park.

"She did very well," Carlson says. "She couldn't sink her feet onto the studio floor the way they'd sink into earth. So she had her feet up, kind of balletic." She rises, briefly, up on her toes.

In one scene, Strom videotaped hay falling from the ceiling, which in the final piece plays backward, rising ecstatically. When it started to fly, Carlson remembers, "the cow lifted her head toward the hay, like a young child seeing snow for the first time."

Deitsch, who with Kois has joined the gathering in the couple's studio, was surprised at the cow's ease with Carlson. She hopes Gerri will be a guest star when the artists give a talk, and perhaps a performance, at the museum in May.

"Many people I know who know cows are amazed at how you were able to get the cow to be so intimate," she says. In the video, dancer and bovine share more than one soulful moment together.


"We were both in new spaces," Carlson says. "We needed each other."

She pauses. "OK," she adds, sotto voce. "I'm a cow whisperer." ■

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