

# Alcolea's vision turns trash into treasure

By Elsa Allen  
 BANNER STAFF

With a gentle touch, Ramon Alcolea pulls open the small panels on one of his wall sculptures, revealing what appears to be an intricate seascape complete with beachside cottages and choppy waves crashing onto the shoreline. Upon closer observation, however, the painting within the sculpture turns out to be no more than a piece of wood, perhaps from an old boat or a piece of siding, paint chipping off in such a way that it creates the illusion of a portrait of the Provincetown harbor.

"For all that is random is really not," says Alcolea, describing his methods and the process that he uses to create his "capsules of the bay" in Provincetown. "You have to eliminate parts and determine what people see." Alcolea uses his discerning eye to scour the beaches and town dumps for cast-off scraps that he will convert into materials for his mixed-media pieces. With careful inspection, Alcolea finds art in what others may pass off as weather-beaten debris, using what is already there to create a picture of his own.

Alcolea's new work, primarily wood assemblage with mixed media, will be on display at both the Musselman Gallery and the Provincetown Public Library during November. He has created a series of interactive pieces that beg for a viewer to move the parts and reveal hidden landscapes and clips of poetry that lie hidden behind hinged doors. His heart series makes creative use out of the "lazy Susan" mechanism, placing spinning hearts against backdrops of driftwood and ornamental details taken from discarded furniture. The result is a cohesive piece that looks as though all of the pieces were meant to come together, that their previous uses



"Provincetown Notes #1" closed up.

were of no consequence and they were intended to be used for art. All of his pieces are crafted with the utmost attention paid to their construction as well as their aesthetic. Alcolea is a craftsman as much as he is an artist, focusing on the carpentry that holds all of his pieces in place as well as what they look like when they are complete.

His dedication to his art has become a way of life for Alcolea, who



Photo Elsa Allen

Ramon Alcolea, holding his dog Lucky, lives surrounded by his art.

claims that his work occupies all of his time. When he is not busy constructing a new piece or searching for new materials, he is updating his extensive portfolios and resume, adding show after show to his already epic list of accomplishments.

"I like to try to keep as active as possible," he says.

This year alone Alcolea has been featured in eight shows and was granted a residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. His small apartment, overlooking Commercial Street, brims with all things art. Art books cover the coffee table, paintings by various local artists hang on the walls or sit in racks waiting for their turn in the rotation. Alcolea manages his collection like his own personal gallery, changing the wall hangings every so often so he gets an opportunity to appreciate each individual piece. His work table drowns in pieces of wood, bits of metal and odds and ends, and more materials wait in piles on his deck.

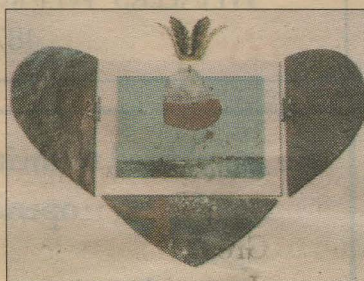
"It's dangerous to walk up my stairs," jokes Alcolea.

A dissected sofa sits next to the front door, surrounded by heaps of scrap metal and wood. Clearly, he finds inspiration in the things that others no longer want. He describes his work as somewhat of a

collage, "finding the right things for the right uses." Although it may look like a mess to the uneducated, untrained eye, his piles are simply the beginnings of his art.

"The pieces will eventually find each other," he says. "I love the whole concept of art and art making."

"Art is the choice I have made," says Alcolea. "I have reaped the rewards, and I've suf-



"Provincetown Notes #1" opens and is transformed.

fered the consequences."

Alcolea seems to be reaping the rewards of his art at the present time, and he wants to make sure that the general public is given the chance to reap the rewards that art has to offer as well. This is the second time that Alcolea has intentionally scheduled a gallery show to coincide with a show at the library. He feels that many people are intimidated by galleries, afraid that they do not know enough

about art to go into one. By showing his work at the library, he says he can reach a larger audience, and perhaps encourage them to go to the gallery as well.

"There's nothing to be afraid of with art," he says. "It's very important for art to be public and accessible."

Alcolea obviously enjoys getting people involved with his art. Unlike many artists, his pieces encourage the viewer to touch the materials and explore their details.

"People love to open and close the panels; they love to see what's written, how it relates to them as the viewer." Alcolea has accumulated a collection of poetry, from writers such as Emily Dickinson, William Carlos Williams and Mark Doty, and keeps snippets on hand to include in his pieces.

"I like to find writing that's right for the piece," he says. When he finds a particular line of text, Alcolea will engrave it on the back of a copper heart that swings from the sculpture on hinges.

Alcolea has lived in Provincetown for 11 years. Like many other local artists, his studio is also his home, where he lives with his small dog, Lucky. He was born in Seville, Spain, and came to the United States when he was 15. He received a degree in sculpture from Parsons

School of Art and Design in New York in 1985. Four years later, deciding that he needed a change from city life, he came to Provincetown. Since then he has shown locally each year, making dedicated rounds of the galleries in town, as well as galleries in Boston, New York, California and Hawaii. He has also received several fellowships, residencies, grants and awards, including a grant from the Pollock-Krasner



"Provincetown Notes #5" features a swinging arm with attached heart.

Foundation. His work is currently represented locally by the Schoolhouse Center for Art and Design.

The show at the Musselman Gallery, 397 Commercial St., opens on Friday with a reception from 7 to 9 p.m. and will run through Nov. 20. For further information on this show contact 487-9954.

The show at the Provincetown Public Library, 330 Commercial St., runs through Nov. 30. For further information on this show contact 487-3981.

# Arts & Entertainment

## At home here, Alcolea shows his heart

By Sue Harrison  
BANNER STAFF

Sculptor Ramon Alcolea's recent shows have been full of intriguing minimalist pieces, sweeping abstract shapes with ridged edges that call out to be touched, but his upcoming show will show a different part of the artist's inspiration, his heart. Alcolea is opening in a group show on Friday at the Schoolhouse Center, 494 Commercial St.

Born and raised in the south of Spain, Alcolea came to the States at 12. He studied art at the Corcoran School of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C. and received a BFA from Parsons School of Design in 1985. Minimalist sculptor Ronald Bladen made him his protégé and assistant and Bladen's influence can still be seen in Alcolea's work. Despite his strong training in the minimalist style, Alcolea has continued to work in prints and pastel drawing and has done work with representational elements.

Alcolea made the move from New York to Provincetown in 1989. He had been visiting here and when he decided to leave the city, he says, this was his obvious choice.

"It's small enough to be livable and yet there are lots of artists, people to talk to and a lot of activity," he says. "This is a great center point where an artist can spread from, live and work here but still be close to Boston and New York."

While he still is represented by the Emerging Collector Gallery in New York, Alcolea has made the Schoolhouse Center his Provincetown base. He has also shown this past year at the Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown Art Association and Museum and the Musselman Gallery. At his Schoolhouse Center show this week, his pastels on paper and recent assemblages using the heart as the central figure will be featured.

"For about four years I've been working with hearts in wood and terra cotta that include writing and

poetry," Alcolea says. "I've used Mark Doty's poetry on some and also used his words in my pastels. The writing is carved into the wood or terra cotta although the written segments are broken down from their original passages."

On one recent piece, "Inside My Little Red Haired Cherry Heart," a heart shape made of joined pieces of wood is mounted on a lazy susan base which allows it to hang at any angle on the wall. Words weave around like snakes and the piece has to be rotated or even picked up and looked at underneath to get the full text.

"In some work I've used the heart or a box as one given and gone from there," he says. "Sometimes you can't tell that it started from there. The hearts move, the writing moves, it becomes narrative. You have to interact with it to get the whole message. Some of the message is even behind the heart."

The heart shape, he says, seems especially effective at getting an immediate response from viewers.

"It's a beautiful shape that expresses many subjects," he says. "And, it has a direct connection with the viewer. No one asks what it means. It just activates a connection between the art, the artist and the viewer."

His process begins with found objects and a written selection which he then begins to combine with no preconceived idea as to what the finished piece will be. "The past few years in the minimalist work I had to be very exact, like building a small house," he says. "This is the exact opposite." But having a more random creation process doesn't mean that the pieces are put together with less construction standards than his larger sculpture. "With my love of craftsmanship, these are gonna last forever," he says. "They are not going to fall apart when you touch them."

And although his heart work may be new to some, he has used the image before. In fact, at one time he says he used to be introduced as Ramon of the Heart.

You could say he's returning to something near and dear to him, that he's taking a break from the severity of minimalism or that he is opening up to the viewer in new ways. You'd probably be right on all counts. He just notes that his current work is "a wonderful series, the right thing for the right time."



Sculptor Ramon Alcolea with his recent work "Inside My Little Red Haired Cherry Heart."

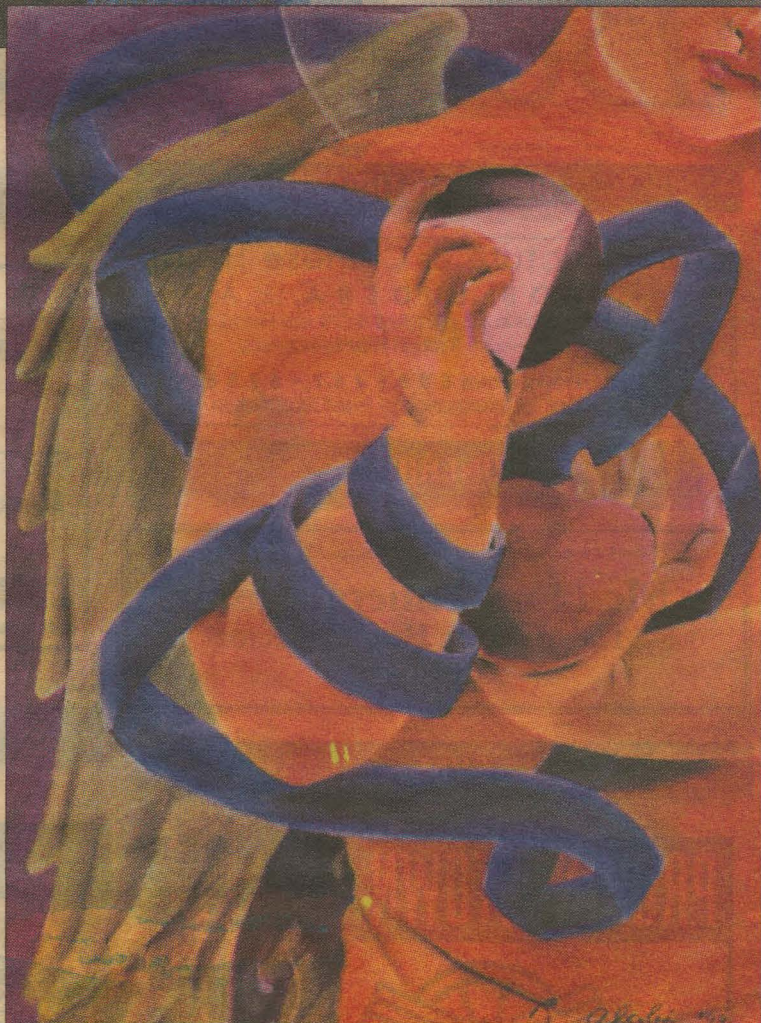
Photos Sue Harrison

Perhaps part of his change comes from being in Provincetown.

"My whole surroundings are my art store, the dump, the beach," he says. "Like with 'Little Heart,' it was almost finished and I went to drop some stuff off at the dump and there it was, a little rusted metal heart, I took it home, it fit perfectly."

Alcolea has been recognized repeatedly for his work and has received a number of fellowships and residencies beginning with one for Skowhegan in 1984. Since then, he's also had residencies at Cummington Community for the Arts, the Blue Mountain Center, the Ragdale Foundation and the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. He was just notified that the Virginia Center has awarded him his seventh fellowship. In mid March he will head for the Blue Ridge Mountains for his three weeks at the Center.

"For a month almost I will have the freedom to wake up every day and only think about my art," he says. "Everyone there, everyone in the kitchen, in the office, is there to make your time possible. For 30 days, the only reason to live, to wake up, is to make art. And everyone around you, that's what they do."



The heart motif also features prominently in Alcolea's pastels.



The rusted heart in the center of his "Little Heart" piece was a serendipitous dump find.

RAMÓN S. ALCOLEA

A4

20 USA



"ART-WOOD-HEART"

NOVEMBER 3-20, 2000  
MUSSELMAN GALLERY  
379 A COMMERCIAL STREET  
PROVINCETOWN, MA 02657  
508.487.9954

FORWARDING ORDER EXPIRES  
NEW YORK, NY 10010

RECEPTION FRIDAY NOVEMBER 3, 7-9 PM

AND

"THE WRITTEN WORD"

NOVEMBER 1-30, 2000  
PROVINCETOWN PUBLIC LIBRARY  
330 COMMERCIAL STREET  
PROVINCETOWN, MA 02657  
508 487-3981

Jack Sonneberg  
217 E. 23rd St  
N.Y. N.Y. 10010



AL

# THE MICHENIST'S HEART of Ramon Alcolea

BY JANE CIABATTARI

When he was a young boy in Puerto de Santa Maria on the Bay of Cadiz in southern Spain, Ramon Alcolea lived with his grandparents, his widowed aunt Adele, his cousin Julio Cesar and his older brother Silverio on the second floor over the post office, where his grandfather was postmaster. After hours, he and Silverio would head downstairs to play.

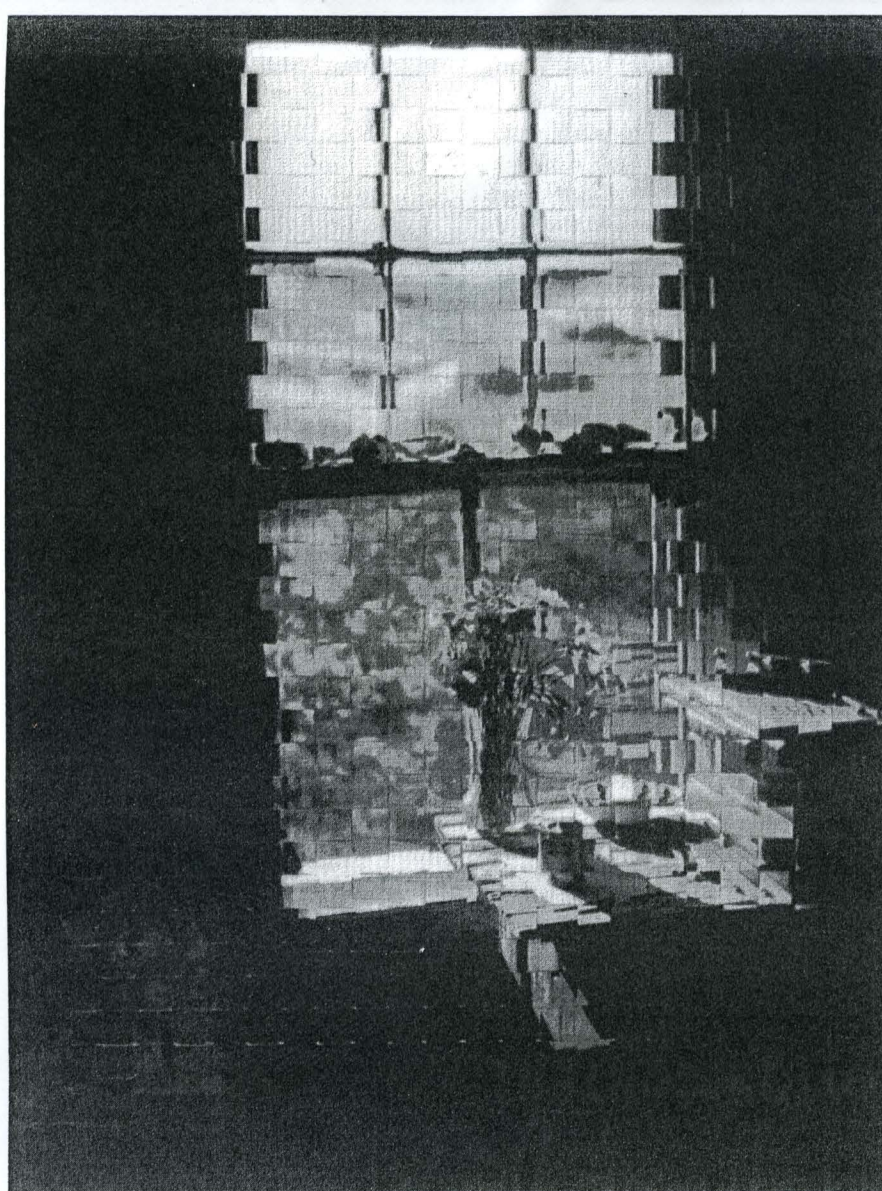
"Spain in the 1960s was like Spain in the 1930s," Alcolea says. "Franco had frozen us." The post office was an old-fashioned operation. The machinery—the hand-crafted brass postal scale with its set of shining metal weights, the pulleys and cranking mechanisms that would rotate and send the packages and envelopes with their hidden messages into the canvas mailbags for delivery—fascinated Alcolea, establishing an imaginative template for the sort of mechanical symmetry, geometric balance, and simplicity that are the essence of minimalism.

Alcolea's fondness for text, which he often incorporates into his sculptures and drawings, can be traced as far back as siesta time in his boyhood, when he would rummage through the books in his grandfather's study. The first book he remembers reading was an illustrated edition of Goethe's *Faust*, about the magician who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for immortality. In his early teens he began to sculpt in plasticine and clay and copy drawings from his grandfather's art books—*Poussin* and *Ingres*, the classics, as well as *Rubens* and *Titian*. "They were so beautiful, so astonishing, I wanted more," he recalls. "The only way I could figure out to manage that was to do it myself."

Alcolea moved to Washington, D.C. in 1973, when his mother was remarried, to an American. He attended the Corcoran School of Art there, then transferred to the Parsons School of Design in New York, where he received his B.F.A. in 1985. He had been singled out for a fellowship to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, the first of a series of honors that now include grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and residencies at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Blue Mountain, Ragdale, and Cummington.

At Parsons he apprenticed to the minimalist sculptor Ron Bladen, who encouraged his technical rigor and discipline. He so thoroughly mastered the form that when a retrospective of Bladen's work was exhibited in Germany in 1998, 10 years after Bladen's death, and at P.S. 1 in 1999, Alcolea reconstructed many of the pieces from scratch.

During his early years in the United States, Alcolea turned frequently to the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca for text to incorporate into his work. In a series called "Language of Exile"



WILLIAM HAMLIN

without the handles, a vase available and recognizable from numerous 20th-century shelter magazines, and yet the vase as revealed in Hamlin's weaving takes on a poetic timelessness. Rendered sea-green by the flora outside the window against which it is photographed, the vase nearly becomes bas-relief, an almost tangible example of Egyptian blue-glazed faience, thanks to the consequences of distortion, and Hamlin's careful weaving. While down in the lower left corner—could it be?—a window pull silhouetted in black masquerades as a miniature bust of Nefertiti. But wait, the references are not only Egyptian, for there is also the sheer lacy curtain draped behind the vase, and with it the shadow of a thousand overdecorated Victorian rooms.

Much of this is subliminal, perhaps unintentional, for as Hamlin remarks, the stimulus for his work is "the joy of seeing, and how we see the world is not all at once but in separate glances built up over time." Hamlin's work is a testament to the joy of sun-splattered interiors where rays of light play across inanimate objects, thereby imbuing them with life. Given the infrequency of human figures appearing in his work, Hamlin might

be suggesting that life lingers in the objects we create. Or in the imprints we leave behind, as in his piece *My Unmade Bed*, a stunning composition of pale blues, grays, and whites, a cluster of sheets and comforters rendered so billowy and plush by Hamlin's artful weaving as to connote upholstered clouds upon which any one of us might be more than content to slip away. At the same time, however, the almost negligible imprint of human figures within the sheets implies a kind of loss or absence, and we are left to contemplate just what it is that remains when our bodies do not.

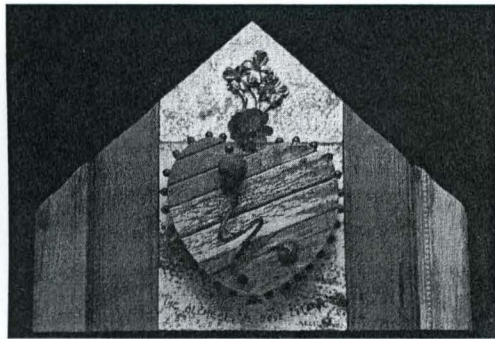
Much like Vermeer's virtuoso depictions of timeless moments, Hamlin's luminous photographic weavings suggest that a good portion of life is found in contemplation of details that quietly surround us.

*M.A. THOMPSON's most recent book is Wolfchild. He is a Ph.D. in American Studies who lives and writes in Manhattan and South Beach.*

(1990), completed the year after he moved to Provincetown, he carved hearts of terra cotta, with English text on the outside of the heart, Spanish text hidden in secret openings inside the heart.

"I was going through a period of adjustment into living in America without longing constantly to go back to Spain," he says. "The pieces helped me work through it and eventually be able to say, 'This is my home, this is who I am,' and to become comfortable living in this culture." More recently, he has used text from Euripides' *Medea*, Emily Dickinson, Reynolds Price, and Mark Doty, the Provincetown poet.

In his latest series, "Love Letters," to be shown this summer at the Schoolhouse Center in Provincetown, Alcolea combines clean severe form with a baroque fondness for the basic iconography of the heart. "The heart can mean anything from love to hate to indifference," he says. Sometimes his hearts are so literal that they can be identified only as something else, the equivalent of a votive offering left upon an altar by a wounded lover seeking healing.



RAMON ALCOLEA

The heart is associated with the Catholic imagery of his boyhood. At Jesuit school in Spain he attended mass daily, twice on Tuesdays. Religious statues surrounded him—the Virgin Mary with the heart outside the body pierced by daggers made a particularly strong impression. His individual wall pieces are intended to read as a whole series, like the orderly and sorrowful Stations of the Cross—"all in the same space and moment in time and the energy and devotion," he says. "This is not random arrangement. It has a beginning, middle and end; the pieces flow into each other and are linked. That is where the narrative comes into it."

The first piece incorporates sections of a love letter, with interactive sections that open, close, and move around, allowing the viewer to read the text. "As I made more in the series, they became more and more austere," Alcolea says. "My tendency is to eliminate side panels. That has always been my pull back and forth, my baroque inner tendencies are always underlined with my minimalist training. In this series of the last two years I feel I'm starting to blend the two. The love letters are kin to each other. You'll see some of the pieces obviously come from the same origin." A speckled greenish gray piece of wood shows up in many of the pieces, as does the same bit of driftwood and a handsome section of wood paneling.

Alcolea combs the shoreline at Herring Cove and Race Point and scouts between the tide pools at Hatch's Harbor for driftwood. He especially prizes sections of seaworthy wood left after big storms. "When you cut it, you can smell the sea air from the salt mingled with the actual wood," he says. He visits the Provincetown recycling station regularly, sifting through piles of metal, grates, old metal trays, pieces of chairs, hunks of wood paneling, frames and sides of houses from as far back as the early 1800s.

His centerpiece of his series is "The Alchemist's Love Letter," a heart carved from found wood, outlined in red beads, and mounted upon a symmetrical icon-like structure of found wood with side panels. A piece of fishing lead representing the alchemist's prima materia is anchored at the bottom right. An umbilical copper pipe, the type used in the alchemical process of transforming base metal into gold, connects with a wooden knob painted gold and a golden blossom that sits at the top of the heart—the sought after transforming power that is love.

"The narrative is in the materials," Alcolea insists. "The change into gold represents the act of the birth of love, the lead and copper, the futility of it. Like any good story, there is more than one interpretation."

JANE CIABATTARI is a New York-based writer and Contributing Editor to *Parade Magazine*. Her short story collection, *Stealing the Fire*, is forthcoming in *Spring 2002*.

## Photography in Boston: 1955-1985

*Edited by Rachel Rosenfield Lafo and Gillian Nagler*

*DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park*

This handsome hardcover catalogue, with 70 color and black and white reproductions, was published last fall on the occasion of the exhibition "Photography in Boston: 1955-1985" at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Lincoln, Massachusetts. It is sure to become a basic reference for those studying the development of photography in the United States from its relative obscurity at mid-century to its primacy in recent times. Essays authored by Kim Sichel and Rachel Rosenfield Lafo survey the Boston photography world during this period. A. D. Coleman thoroughly examines the critical writing on art photography in Boston, and Arno Ralph Minneken discusses the lasting influence of the Polaroid Corporation in Cambridge, with its photographic technology and an unprecedented program of direct support to individual photographers.

In a fine essay titled "Science and Mysticism" Kim Sichel describes an important matrix of edu-



MARIE COSINDAS

the Charles River in Cambridge, Dr. Howard Edgerton produced his amazing stroboscopic photographs beginning in 1933 and was later joined by Gyorgy Kepes, the influential author of *Language of Vision*, who produced Bauhaus-inspired photographs and other photographic light experiments. Minor White, the famed teacher and publisher of *Aperture* joined MIT's faculty in 1965. He contributed a more consciously spiritual approach to the practice of photography. As he wrote in *Aperture* in 1970, he was enamored of the camera's ability not only to record but also to metamorphose its subject. With his more science-oriented colleagues a powerful blend of aesthetics and science was born at one of the world's great creative institutions. In nearby Providence at the Rhode Island School of Design, faculty members Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind, both arriving to the area from the Institute of Design (formerly the Chicago Bauhaus), shared some of these same visual concerns of high definition and rigorous, refined imagery with the MIT faculty. The strong tradition of street photography and documentary work exemplified by Jules Aarons among many others, including family and personal documents, was a counterpoint to the particularly scientific or aesthetically conscious work of Edgerton and White.

The Polaroid Corporation included artists and consultants in the continuing development of its instant-picture technology. It provided photographers as diverse as Ansel Adams, Marie Cosindas, Elsa Dorfman, and Mark Morrisroe with camera and film as well as access to its extraordinary 20 by-24-inch large-format cameras. The beautiful and romantic color Polaroids of Marie Cosindas quickly became famous and brought instant photography into the contemporary art world as a viable medium. Polaroid director Eelco Wolf was responsible for enticing other photographers of international reputation such as Helmut Newton and Josef Sudel to work with Polaroid cameras, thereby extending the influence of this Cambridge-based tech-

12/20/01 *Ramon* AM

## Alcolea shows in benefit for library

Ramon Alcolea is showing small mixed-media pieces at the Provincetown Public Library, 330 Commercial St., through the end of the year. Proceeds from the sales of his pieces will be split with the library.

These works were previously on display as part of a larger exhibition at Bentley College in Waltham, Mass. and were partially funded by a grant from the Local Massachusetts Cultural Council.

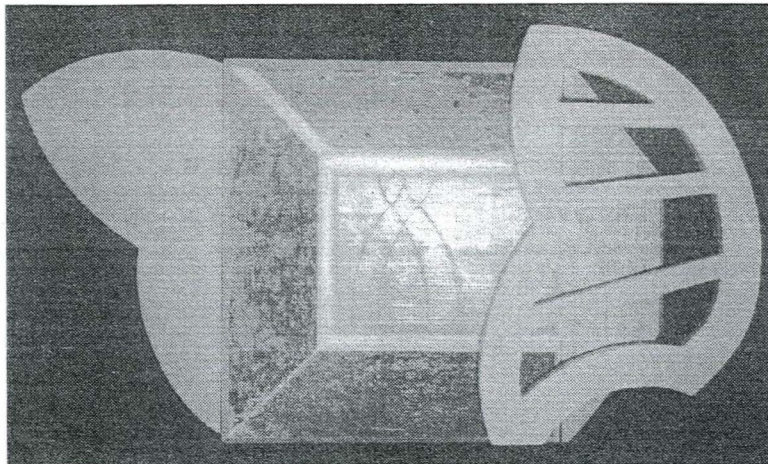
A4

# Alcolea's new work is in the pink

By Sue Harrison  
BANNER STAFF

When Ramon Alcolea loaded up his van with found wood and headed for his fellowship at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts last December, he had no idea that a piece of pink wall paneling tucked in with the driftwood and construction debris would turn out to be the central inspiration for a new series of work, but it did. The resulting artwork, *Five New Wood Wall Pieces*, will be on display at the Musselman Gallery, 379A Commercial St. The show opens from 7 to 10 p.m. on Friday and hangs through June 12.

Alcolea has a long history of working with found objects. Last year he made the transition from architectural shapes to more narrative pieces with his first heart series. That series worked around the heart motif and some pieces included a written narrative.



*"Be That As It May," wood wall assemblage by Ramon Alcolea.*

This winter at his fellowship in Virginia a whole new type of work began to emerge. From his van-load of wood from the beach and dump, he pulled out the faded pink wall paneling and used it in what he calls an aerial view of a landscape. (The piece has been sold and will not appear in this show.) When he had finished the construction, he was bothered by the raw edges where he had

cut the paneling.

"I went to Home Depot and bought pink paint just to do the edges," he says. "But then, I had this can of pink paint in my workshop. It [the color] turned out to be a very unifying force. It can stand on its own against wood that's been ravaged by man and by time."

Still, he says, like any unusual or repeating element, the artist must be careful not to overuse a color for the sake of itself instead of as an element in a larger context. "It's such a simple thing but so dangerous," he says of the possibility of becoming caught up in one aspect of his work. If that happens, it ceases to work as a whole and becomes cutesy, he says.

He used the pink paint to accent certain of the sections of his new work and succeeds in having it become an important but not overpowering aspect of the pieces.

He wants to give credit to the

## Film Fest volunteers needed

In an effort to make the Second Annual Provincetown Film Festival an even bigger success than the first, festival organizers are seeking dedicated, hard-working and fun-loving volunteers to perform a variety of tasks preceding the festival and at festival events.

Volunteers will get an opportunity to view the workings of the festival from behind the scenes while working with a diverse group of people. They will also receive a benefits package that provides opportunities to view the films and attend the festival VIP parties and events.

Volunteer coordinator Hillsman Wright is extremely pleased with the number of people who have volunteered so far, many returning from last year, and hopes that word will spread to others.

Wright already has over 100 people signed up to perform tasks ranging from manual labor to public relations. He hopes to be able to get enough volunteers

so that they will be able to work various events in shifts, allowing them an opportunity to enjoy the events themselves.

Wright will transform the firehouse next to Town Hall into a volunteer center. Volunteers will also be asked to attend one of three training sessions in which they will be given information regarding festival events and venues, as well as learning some basic emergency procedures.

"They are representatives of the festival," says Wright, who has learned through his experiences in theater the importance of having well-trained staff because "anything can happen at any time."

Wright encourages interested individuals to sign up early so they can benefit from the training sessions and be well organized by festival time.

If you are interested in working either behind the scenes or with the public for the festival, call Hillsman Wright at 487-8384.

Virginia Center for the Arts for allowing him the time and space to work. Fellowships, whether season-long or just a couple of weeks, give the artist a new way to focus and rejuvenate.

"It's about continuous energy without the breaks of everyday life," he says. "There is nobody calling you. There are no phones. You wake up, go to the studio and hook up

where you left off a few hours before. It's an elimination of extraneous information so you can be attuned only to the working materials in front of you."

Alcolea is also working on a new heart series called "Love Letters" that will be shown later this season at the Schoolhouse Center. He's also doing a smaller set of pieces he calls "Love Notes."