

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 3, 2001

MFA discoveries

En route to "Boston 1900," I made two detours: one, to the MFA's rotunda, where Shellburne Thurber's photographs are on display; the other to the musical instruments gallery, which has in the past had such limited hours I'd never seen it open before.

Thurber, a contemporary Boston photographer, is the recipient of the museum's seventh Maud Morgan Prize, which generally comes with a small display of the winner's work, in this case Thurber's sumptuous color photographs of deserted, derelict rooms, places of peeling paint, graffiti, cracked walls, and worn floors. The rotunda is an august, echoing space; Thurber's photographs act as windows onto a world that is shabby but rich in texture and glowing with a sublime light. Her photographs are up through Jan. 21.

The musical instruments gallery turns out to be a magical place, crammed with everything from harpsichords to hurdy-gurdies, from many countries and eras, from the exquisitely crafted to the primitively made. The good news is that the gallery's hours have expanded during the run of the related "Dangerous Curves: The Art of the Guitar" exhibition upstairs. Through Feb. 25, the gallery is open the regular hours of the main museum (not the even longer West Wing hours).

Whimsies, linked

Installations, typically large, are also typically autonomous. Not so "Making Ends Meet," at the Mills Gallery of the Boston Center for the Arts through Jan. 21. The show is the swan song of depart-



Bruce Brosnan's angular sculpture "Fold" shares a picket fence idea with another piece in the BCA exhibition.

ing BCA curator Shelly Bancroft, who invited six artists to create installations that in some way would connect to one another. That involved working together on site and considerable improvisation. The result is playful rather than profound, meandering rather than meaningful.

You enter the gallery by walking over the bridge that spans the toy railroad tracks that are a feature of Mick O'Shea's "Artworld," a Levittown where all the tiny paper houses line up in perfect rows on the floor. O'Shea plays with scale, casting you as a giant looking down. The railway tracks curve around cans of rust preventer, turpentine, and other toxic substances that look ready to kill off this bizarre suburb, or maybe attack the "nature" O'Shea has included in the form of pots of paperwhite narcissus and ivy. These tower beside the houses like genetic mutants.

O'Shea's town is surrounded by little white picket fences, an element Bruce Brosnan borrows for his "Fold," an angular, gangly assemblage of wooden sticks whose geometry is echoed in a Sol LeWitt-like wall drawing behind.

The legs of the sculpture are enclosed by the picket fences; "Fold" dwarfs the fences, but it's the latter that seem in control.

O'Shea's piece also includes a bottle on wheels attached to a string that connects to Daniel Stupar's "Requiem (A Raft for a Rock)" like an umbilical cord. "Requiem" is made of the old, the battered, and the rusty. Yet it culminates in escape, in the form of a tricycle flying off the floor.