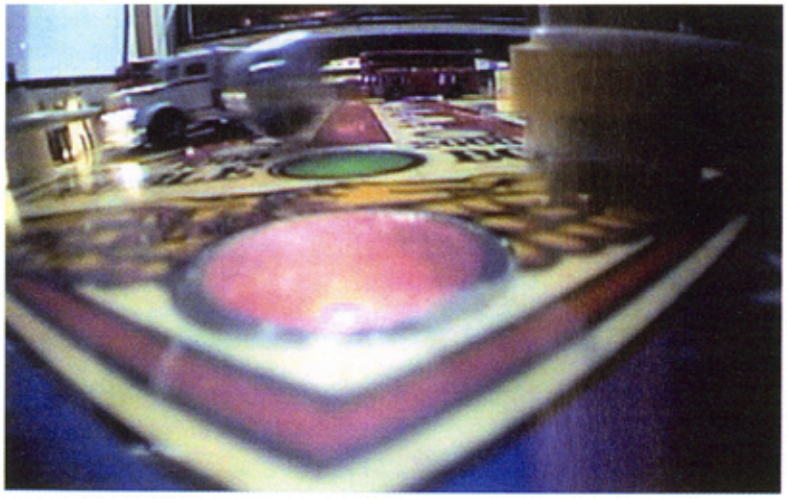
NEW ART EXAMINER

JULY-AUGUST 2001
VOLUME 28 NUMBER 10

ROSEMARIE FIORE, CHRIS LARSON

MIDWAY INITIATIVE GALLERY, 2500 UNIVERSITY AVE. W., ST PAUL, 55114 651/917-1851

"IT'S A REMARKABLE PIECE of apparatus." Those words, which open Franz Kafka's short story "In the Penal Colony," might have served equally well as an impromptu subtitle for this two-person show. Like the discipline-minded officer on Kafka's island, Rosemarie Fiore and Chris Larson have imaginations that obsess over the potentials of machines—obsessions that blossom into questions about the relationships between machines, humans, and art.



ROSEMARIE FIORE
Balls of Steel (detail), 2001. Video still.

Larson's *The Gastral Colony* consists of a 16-millimeter film transferred to DVD and projected next to a scale-model of a rustic church. The film opens with an introductory pastoral scene of a tractor moving deliberately through quiet fields shrouded in haze. It cuts quickly to the interior of a farm outbuilding that contains an immense piece of dangerous-looking machinery made of wood. This interruption of the pastoral becomes even more haunting when Larson, seen mounted atop the machine like the farmer on his tractor, sets the thing in motion, his feet pumping resolutely on its pedals. The machine's movements pierce synthetic, pliant sacs and membranes nestled within the crooks of its intricate components, releasing a viscous fluid. The goo coats the artist and ultimately sluices into a church resembling the model that sits in the gallery.

Like previous sculptural efforts by Larson, the apparatus in the film is staggering not only in scale and complexity, but also because it is constructed of rough wood, its timbers intersecting at improbable angles and held together by a plethora of tongues, grooves, and pegs. His earlier works remain stationary—they are constructed to be as structurally immobile as they are formally convoluted, pitting stasis against the functionality we usually expect of machines. This new one, however, appears to work almost too well. Larson is trapped in his own contraption; his exertions suggest that this machine is making demands on him, instead of the other way around. Like a workout apparatus suited less for exercise than for a kind of exorcism, the object is a provocative reminder of age-of-technology fears that machines threaten to deplete our souls, colonizing our bodies and minds alike.

While Larson's work posits a factory regime in which machines reign and humans are little more than the raw material of labor, Fiore's machinery is rather more concerned with consumption as the supposed realm of leisure and relaxation. Her captivating video *Balls of Steel* is shot entirely from the drain of a pinball machine; one watches from that vantage point as the balls wreak havoc on numerous tiny toy cars rolling aimlessly from collision to collision. On the wall nearby hung a series of vellum templates cut to fit the machine's playing surface, with dynamic designs in paint arcing across them. These tracings, titled *Evel Knievel Pinball Drawings*, are the trails made by the paint-dipped balls as they are shot about. As in Fiore's previous video *Christina's World* (in which the camera is mounted on an electric floor buffer, which is set free to move irregularly across an expanse of linoleum), there is a sense here that the artwork would virtually create itself without the hands of its engineer. In fact, as the tiny school buses and station wagons inside the pinball machine careen about like expensive props in a Hollywood special-effects extravaganza, one can't help but conclude that the agent here is a godlike, omnipotent force, rather than a mere pinball wizard with a pocketful of quarters and some time to kill.

The success of Fiore's pieces lies in the way they integrate the camera itself into the logic of the machinery it ponders; by contrast, Larson's *The Gastral Colony* limits the camera to the task of representation, observing the mechanism from afar rather than being made physically part of it. The result is a tension his piece cannot resolve. While film does more justice to the movements of his machine than would stills, its linear flow seems to promise a climax that fails to materialize. To stand in the presence of one of his fascinating contrivances is to risk being suffocated by its immobile gravity, but here another machine, the camera, intervenes. The filmic apparatus robs Larson's remarkable construction of the static works' patient strength, a move that parallells the sapping of the human subject in the film's narrative. With this contradiction, his work joins Fiore's in revealing the unruly power of machinery to transcend the intentions of its human masters. Fiore and Larson thus qualify their celebration of the machine, all the while implicitly echoing the boast of Kafka's proud (but ultimately doomed) officer: "From this moment it works all by itself."

Andrew Knighton is a writer and doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

ROSEMARIE FIORE
Balls of Steel (detail), 2001. Video still.