

Artist's work has creative 'spark'

By Ryan Hutton, North Adams transcript

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ADAMS — Gregory Shakar sat at his workbench with a device in front of him that could only have been dreamed up by a "steampunk" inventor — think "Wild, Wild West."

Dubbed "The Copper Urchin" when whole, the two halves of the bronze-colored copper sphere were a mess of green and yellow wires leading to its computerized brain, tiny lights and prickly whiskers made of metal. When it's done, Shakar will ask people to run their hands through the whiskers to surprising effect.

"When people pass their hands over it, the whiskers will touch the little brass barrels on the sphere and music will play and the LEDs will light up," said Shakar, a part-time computer programmer and adjunct professor at New York University. "When it's all put together it has a real organic feel, like it's a creature that's reacting to being touched."



Not confined to the laboratory of a musically inclined mad scientist, "The Copper Urchin" is part of Shakar's interactive art exhibit "MoodVectors" premiering at the new Greylock Arts gallery on July 13.

"The idea behind the piece was to engage the tactile sensation. That's not a typical thing in an art exhibit for one thing, but it's also unique in the computer/human interface world," he said Thursday. "We're not used to seeing our hands enveloped in the control circuit. The mouse and keyboard are practical and work well but they're not about our experience with them."

In addition to changing the way people interact with machines, Shakar is excited to be the premiere exhibit at the new gallery in the old Pociask building at 93 Summer St. Purchased by New Yorkers Matthew Belanger and his significant other Marianne Petit in October, the gallery wasn't supposed to go online for years but Belanger said he and Petit got so excited about it they just couldn't wait.

"The idea of putting a gallery in here was originally a long-term plan of ours," he said. "At first, we just wanted to get settled in up here and get comfortable and then move forward slowly. But we just got so caught up in the idea and one thing led to another, and here we are getting ready for our first show."

Belanger, a freelance Web developer, and Petit, a full-time professor at NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program, decided to open up a gallery that would showcase art that was off the radar of bigger galleries. "What we've been saying is that we'd like to facilitate pieces that are, in our minds, underrepresented in the art world either because it's not necessarily sellable or easy to hang on the wall," he said. "We don't really see ourselves as a commercial gallery."

Enter Shakar's "Lightening Organ," another display in the exhibit. Comprised of several spark gaps (also known as Jacob's Ladders), it creates electrical sparks that travel up two V-shaped metal rods and are a staple in mad-scientist movies. The flowing electricity emits a buzz or pitch that can be controlled by the audience on a keyboard. Shakar said the idea is to reveal the underlying media that controls electronic art.

"Unlike with a painting where everyone has an understanding of what paint is and can mix it together to make a new color, we're not very accustomed to experiencing electricity," he said.

Belanger said Greylock Arts may not do monthly exhibits at first because both he and Petit still live in New York most of the time, but ultimately they plan on doing much more. "We are committed to having a presence up here and really the gallery idea is just the start of our long-term goal of a community arts organization with an educational and community outreach components instead of just being a space for art to be seen," he said.

"MoodVectors" will be at Greylock Arts from July 13 to Aug. 18. The opening reception will be Friday, July 13, from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. and regular gallery hours will be noon to 4. For more information visit www.greylockarts.net