

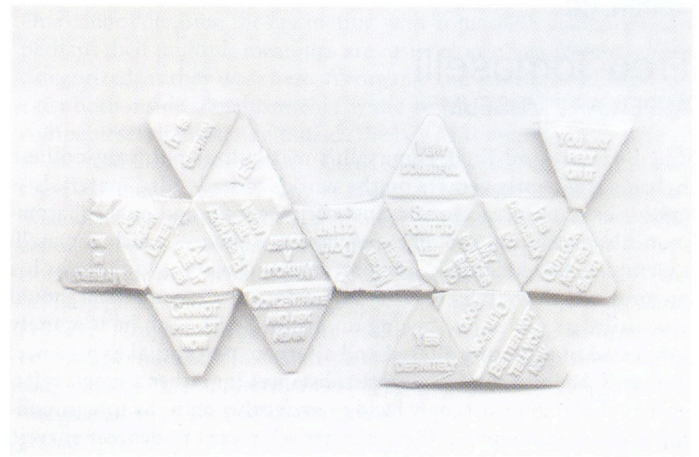
## CHICAGO

# Aspen Mays

GOLDEN

Escape, the sheer exhilaration of chucking it all and getting far, far away, seems much on the mind of Aspen Mays. While this Chicago-based artist never indicates just what she might so assiduously be fleeing, the urge to relocate, physically or psychologically, is suggested in her recent work, and this show offered a witty repertoire of options for getting the hell out of Dodge.

An allusion to space travel surfaces in *The Future of the Future (Spaceman)*, 2009, a photograph of a fictive astronaut made of aluminum foil standing in an aluminum foil-gilded room. Fusing high fantasy and low technology—endless reflections pinball around the crinkly foil; a cardboard-box helmet sits atop the astronaut's shoulders—Mays creates the sense of a high school science-fair project gone awry. But that doesn't deflate the curiously iconic nature of the image, which directly refers to planetary escape. *Larry*, 2008, is her homage to Larry Walters, or "Lawn Chair Larry," who in 1982 strapped himself into a lawn chair attached to forty-five helium-filled weather balloons. Taking along some sandwiches and a six-pack, he rose sixteen thousand feet above California before popping some of the balloons with a pellet gun and floating comfortably down. Mays, in turn, made a small sculpture of a lawn chair and, working with Chicago's Adler Planetarium, attached it, a few party balloons, and a camera to a research weather balloon. The resultant time-lapse digital video captures her Lilliputian lawn chair's epic journey to a staggering ninety-six



thousand feet above earth and back again—one giant leap for suburbia. (Mays displayed the surviving miniature chair in a sealed vitrine near the video, more an artifact than a sculpture.) As the comfy latticed lawn chair—a symbol of bourgeois respite—boldly goes where few have gone before, the audience is left wondering whether, in the end, escape is more illusory than actual. (That old adage “Wherever you go, there you are” seems appropriate to the sentiment.)

Another kind of escape is the abjuration of will, the surrender to mystical forces that supposedly determine one's fate. Such forces, subject to Mays's tongue-in-cheek sensibility, are represented here by the Magic 8-Ball, which the artist disassembles. In *Dissection of a Magic 8 Ball*, 2008, the purple liquid from inside one of these plastic orbs was poured into a round glass dish and scanned on a flatbed scanner. The mysterious dark sphere recalls both a culture in a petri dish and an enormous and all-enveloping void. In *Map of the World (After Buckminster Fuller)*, 2008, Mays unfurls the icosahedral die that floats within the Magic 8-Ball and arranges its twenty triangular faces—each adorned with such classic phrases as IT IS DECIDEDLY SO and OUTLOOK NOT SO GOOD—into a shape recalling Fuller's Dymaxion Map, which was introduced the same year as the toy, in 1946. Commingling the Magic 8-Ball's presumed prescience with Fuller's rethinking of how to represent the planet, Mays nods to visions and visionaries of the past. Thus, with a trenchant and openhanded wit, she proposes that the quest for escape is as simple as reimaging the world around us, finding new possibilities in the commonplace.

—James Yood