

a e ART

Alison Bechdel and Phranc Put on a Paper Play

BY FRAN MORAVCSIK

If you were among the crowds swarming at this year's Art Hop, you might have ducked into the pine street art works and noticed some unfamiliar art by some familiar names.

Certainly you know Vermont's own Alison Bechdel and her "Dykes to Watch Out For" comic strip right here in *OITM*. Well, she has taken a giant step outside the small frames of her elegantly detailed lesbian universe (and I am not just talking about her recently published autobiographical book, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*).

In addition, for those women who found their way into our community during the golden years of womyn singer/songwriters, the name of Phranc the Folksinger brings up memories of some clever lyrics from a cute butch with dark eyes and a trademark flattop haircut. Unless you were uncommonly smitten, however, or have been in certain corners of the Los Angeles scene more recently, she is probably not someone you have thought of in years. And anyway, what does she have to do with art?

Well, all of you who were, like me, far behind the times on what has been going on with these lesbian icons, are much indebted

to Liza Cowan. Cowan opened the pine street art works last December, and is featuring these two women in one of her first major shows. In fact, we are doubly indebted to her, as she was the one who introduced Alison and Phranc during a Michigan Womyn's Music Festival back in the mid-1980s. The friendship has been going strong over the years, and when Liza suggested a joint show, the two of them inspired each other not only to present their latest work, but even to create pieces together.

So, if you dropped by at "Paper Play: New work by Alison Bechdel and Phranc," what would you see? I stopped in as they were hanging the show, and the first thing that caught my eye was a life-size cardboard cutout, drawn in Bechdel's instantly recognizable style, and just as recognizably a portrait of Phranc. This flat figure was wearing a three-dimensional striped shirt, clean and crisp and cheerful, made from painted and sewn paper.

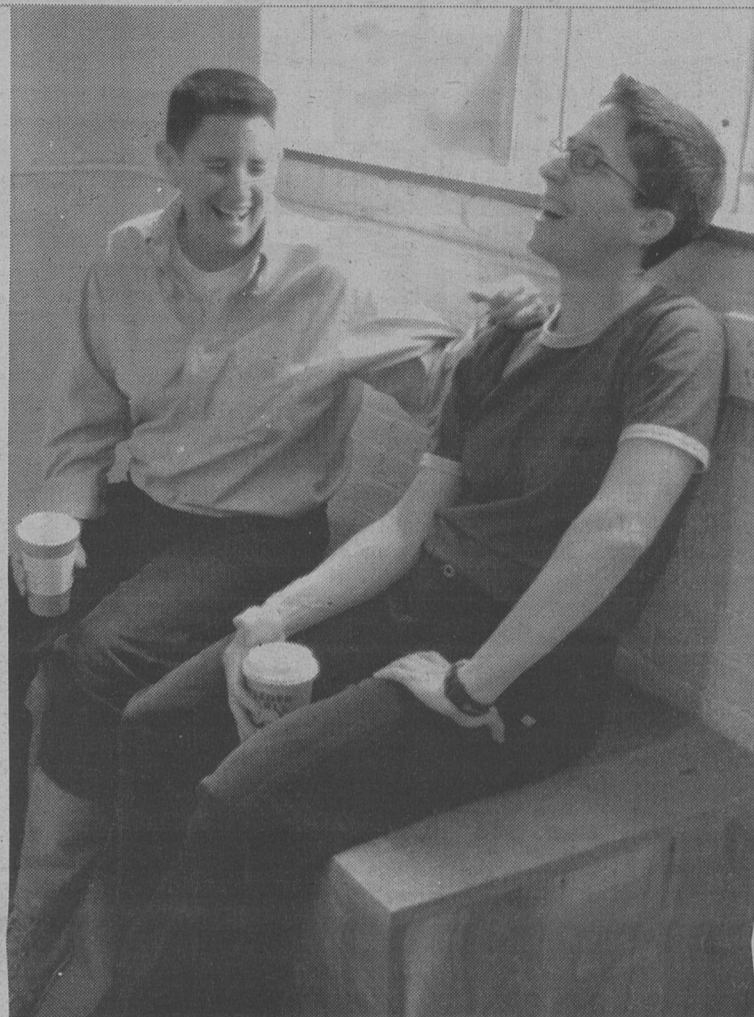
Phranc has been working in cardboard and kraft paper art for many years, making toys, advertisements, shoes, and all kinds of objects. (Do check out the cardboard chocolates in the corner.) Only in the past nine months, however, has she rolled out the paper, painted it like fabric, cut

out the pattern, and actually sewn it together on her grandmother's old sewing machine, rather than just using glue. The natural stiffness of the kraft paper gives a three-dimensional liveliness to the clothing that no starch can deliver, eternally fresh and new and somehow humorous.

My personal favorites of Phranc's paper creations are the pairs of shoes, in which I enjoy the hint of communication within that couple. Even when the shoes have a slightly used shape, they have the characteristic freshness of the paper material, not a hint of grime, mildew, and stinky feet. You could put these on the table without a qualm.

Phranc has been showing her paper art in galleries in Los Angeles and New York, but that is not all that is going on in her life. She still performs her music, has appeared in several films, and raises two kids with her partner. If you would like to know more, you can check out her blog at phranc-the-cardboardcobbler.blogspot.com.

Now, what about Alison Bechdel? Well, you can see the original sketches for her strips and her book, and I hear they are quite collectable these days, but for the surprise, you need to go into the next room. She has burst out of her meticulous little squares, grabbed a large brush



Phranc (l) and Alison Bechdel

PHOTO: LIZA COWEN

and huge sheets of paper, and filled them with freehand, life-size figures. One after another, these seem to engage in some nightmare of a struggle or a predicament of mythic proportions, stepping well beyond the careful objective reality of what she has shown us previously. But like everything that Bechdel does, these monumental drawings are

Paper Play: New work by Alison Bechdel and Phranc
pine street art works, 404 Pine Street, Burlington, Tuesdays-Saturdays, 11-5 Through October

absolutely truthful. Her work is so personal that it can sometimes feel almost intrusive to look at it. She is so naturally honest that it is beyond courageous - it is simply how she is. This is the way artists are supposed to be, but very few of them reach this level. If you are a fan, you can also find her on the web at dykestowatchoutfor.com.

You have until October 31, 2006 to catch the exhibit. What you missed if you did not come during the Art Hop was to see the two friends together. They agreed that from the first they understood each other, appreciated each other's ideas, admired each other's work, and enjoyed each other's inventiveness and imagination. Wouldn't we all like a friend like that? Step into the pine street art works, next door to Speeder and Earl's, and see what Phranc and Alison Bechdel came up with together. ▼

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→ Fran Moravcsik has served on the Mountain Pride Media board and was a winner at the Gay Games this summer.