

# Part 2

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## HIGH ART

# A wing and a chair

Paul Villinski's 'Air Chair' lands at C.W. Post B4

## COVER STORY

N part 2

## Soaring imagination

## Sailplane pilot Paul Villinski focuses his 'bird-brained' artistry on flight

BY ARIELLA BUDICK

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**A**wheelchair, sprouting wings, dangles from the ceiling. It glows in the twilight gallery, half-organic, half-mechanical — a hare-brained contraption for lifting the gravity-bound into the sky; a hybrid scheme combining bird and machine. It is Paul Villinski's "Air Chair," a one-object installation at the Hillwood Art Museum at the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University, Brookville.

"It's the perfect merging of my history, my hobby — which I'm very passionate about — and my subject matter as a visual artist," says the soft-spoken and intense Villinski, taking a few moments' respite from installing the piece to sit down and chat.

Villinski, 47, is compelled by flight. It has colonized his imagination, his leisure and his work life. The son of an Air Force navigator, he seems to have aviation in the primordial fabric of his character. He spent his childhood building balsawood model airplanes. And at 13, he persuaded his parents to buy him a \$5 build-it-yourself hang-glider kit.

"When I had the framework completed, I found that I wasn't strong enough to pick it up. I was horribly disappointed to discover that I couldn't fly it. So I abandoned my dream of learning to fly."

Temporarily, as it turns out. Villinski discovered art at 14, dropped out of high school and meandered through assorted

jobs. Eventually, he found his way to art school, graduating from Cooper Union in 1984. His paintings have always showcased bird's-eye views. "I have moments of identifying rather deeply with birds," he says.

**Body and soul**

When he hit his mid-30s, Villinski began challenging gravity with his body as well as his imagination, and the excitement spilled into his art. He took up paragliding, which involves running off the edge of a cliff on the assumption that the wind will fill a large rectangular canopy and launch you on currents of air. Then, in 2004, he got a pilot's license and bought a sailplane, which has fixed wings but no engine.

"I spend as much time as possible soaring," he says.

At the same time, as an artist, he lifted out of two dimensions and into the third. He put together a series of wall pieces shaped like giant pairs of wings, assembled out of lost gloves he had scavenged from the streets of New York.

"Lift," a feathered span designed for human use, has a pair of leather straps ideal for outfitting a modern Icarus. It has the look of long-lost technology, or of archaeological proof for ancient myths. Villinski's wing sculptures are beautifully crafted conceptual pieces, elaborate conceits and precious objects.

Villinski has a straightforwardly symbolic interpretation of these pieces: "The gloves become a stand-in for the human hand, for bringing hands together to make things possible, like flight." But he deals in impossibility, too, because he makes tools for jobs that can't be done — not by strapping wings on one's back, in any case. Human flight has its limits, as Icarus found out.

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Villinski installs his one-object exhibition, "Air Chair," at C.W. Post's Hillwood Art Museum.

Even as they reach heavenward, Villinski's works always have one foot in the earthbound realm. The origins of "Air Chair," for instance, lie along the jogging route he takes from his home in Long Island City to Roosevelt Island, which is anchored by large medical facilities. During his runs, he noticed a group of disabled veterans who parked themselves by the riverside each day, and he reflected on the idea of giving wings to the immobilized. One morning, he saw a discarded wheelchair behind Goldwater Hospital, and

it occurred to him that perhaps he could turn it into a glider.

"I knew it was time to make the piece," he says. "It's a piece for my old age. If I should live to be old and infirm and have to wheel myself around, this is the kind of thing I'd like to do it with." He is, of course, acutely aware that his daredevil hobbies leave him vulnerable to the types of injuries that might confine him.

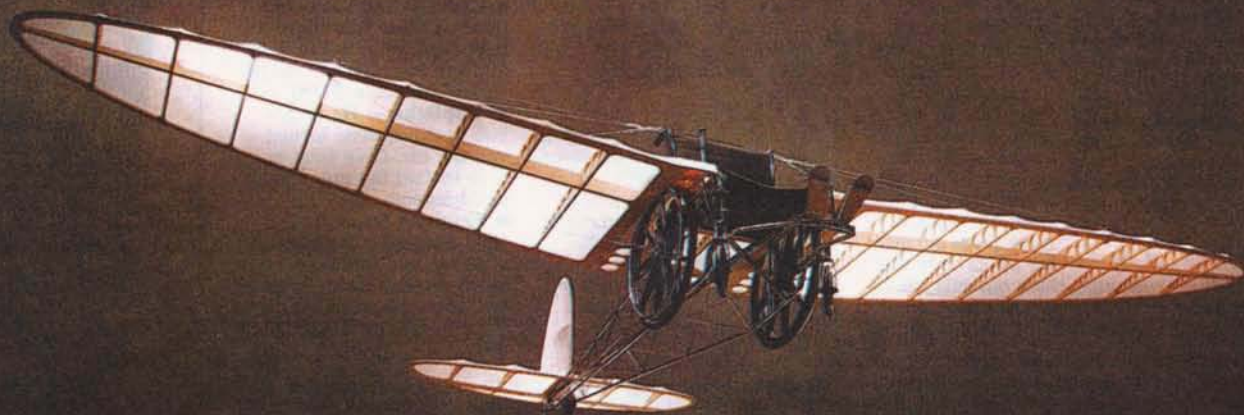
### Craving credibility

Villinski wants viewers to wonder whether his gizmos actually work. (They don't, he says.) He goes to great pains to make his machines believable, using materials purchased from aircraft suppliers, engineering controls that look functional. He is enormously proud of a motorcycle helmet on top of which he attached a large wooden propeller driven by an engine: an object he describes as "an industrial-strength beanie" that seemed just credible enough to work.

This, too, harks back to a childhood experience. At age 7 or 8, he became fixated on a backpack helicopter in the pages of the Sears catalog. After much pleading, he received the thing for Christmas and was promptly disillusioned: "I was out on the lawn, running and jumping, and I was crushed, in the end, that it didn't work."

And so a kid disillusioned with mail-order novelties grew into an adult who constructs his own crazy gizmos: the helicopter helmet, butterflies fashioned out of crushed beer cans, army-surplus boots with giant springs in the soles — all props for fantasies that flutter on the thermal winds of second chances. Villinski makes art as a way of recycling his deflated dreams.

**WHEN & WHERE** "Paul Villinski: Air Chair." Through July 3 at the Hillwood Art Museum, C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University, 720 Northern Blvd., Brookville. For exhibition hours, call 516-299-2788 or visit [liu.edu/museum](http://liu.edu/museum).



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / ARI MINTZ

Villinski's "Air Chair," like all his creations, aims to be believable. The Long Island City artist wants people to wonder if the wheelchair with wings will work.