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At the RISD Museum, you control the show

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A family with three small children enters a room at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum. The youngest child, Karis, 3, sees a bright red button on the wall and squeals, "Can I touch it?"

The children amuse themselves for several minutes running from one wall to another, seeing how they can make the pictures on the walls move faster, grow larger or spin in circles.

In this particular exhibit, Brian Knep's '90 GS'92 "Exempla," such behavior is encouraged. The exhibit is made up of four installations projected onto the walls of the Anne, Michael and Amelia Spalter New Media Gallery. It is interactive — by pressing a button, stepping down on a pedal or turning a dial, guests can make the images come to life. The drawings themselves are strikingly simple, childish stick figure cartoons.

Knep's work "is not like anything else I've seen," said Judith Tannenbaum, Richard Brown Baker curator of contemporary art at the RISD Museum. That may be because Knep's background is in science and technology, and he was "a science guy" before he ever considered pursuing a career in visual art, she added.

In "Escape," the most surprising and dynamic of Knep's installations, two big red buttons activate the drawings within two separate pools of light, causing them to explode out and invade each other's space. "Escape" packs Knep's signature egg-shaped stick figures so tightly together that they are hard to identify individually. Rather, they resemble the contents of a giant Petri dish.

In "Embark," composed of two cylinders of light filled with figures, the movement of the drawings is more leisurely and depends on the length of time the viewer presses the button. Every viewer's experience is unique.

"Excel" speeds up gradually when guests step on a pedal embedded in the floor. The images simply spin faster within a circle of light, constantly drawn towards the center of a vortex.

"Expand" may not look like much when left to its own devices, but when the viewers turn the dial below the installation, the stick figures swarm and scatter as excitedly as the rest.

But the dial looks more like a device to control the room's temperature than a part of the piece — the only technical difficulty with this work. Guests can be forgiven for leaving the piece alone, or staring in confusion while wondering what their role should be.

While influenced by Knep's scientific background and including digital technology in its execution, "Exempla" is by no means inaccessible to the casual viewer. "The great thing about this exhibition is that it can appeal to an adult or a child," Donna Desrochers, the museum's director of marketing, wrote in an e-mail to The Herald.

"We didn't market it that way, it's the nature of the artist's work. You can look at it, ponder it, interact with it," she added.

"We can tell when children are down here. Even from upstairs, we can hear them squealing," said Francine Ferrante, assistant supervisor in security for the museum.

Knep's pieces are thought-provoking, but they also have a sense of whimsy. "Identifying with and laughing at the creatures' behaviors allows me to accept and laugh at my own, similar, behaviors, which can lead to change and a more mindful experience of life," Knep said in the museum's press release.

The pieces are simple, joyful fun for children or the older viewer's inner child.

This exhibit is definitely worth checking out if you are already at the museum, but it's too small to make the trek for just one room. Exempla will be at the RISD Museum through March 6.