



Love those little fingers: a visitor to the Portland Children's Museum takes on the Silvergator. Its eye is an old-fashioned doorbell, which rings with an alligator's roar. Fiber artist Bonnie Meltzer is at rear.

Touchy-Feely

Portland's wild kingdom

The Zipperpillar, Silvergator and Chameleco are not animals from prehistoric times who fed off a Blooming Bush and an All Seasons Tree. They are the latest addition to the Portland Children's Museum, and they are made out of little more than boards, ribbons, zippers, wire and yarn.

Zipperpillar Park, an indoor fantasy world of sculptured animals and plants, is the creation of Portland artist Bonnie Meltzer. Touching is permitted; in fact, it's essential. The Park is meant to teach children about change. Meltzer designed her flora and fauna on an Apple Macintosh computer, altering shape, shade and texture right on the screen.

The Zipperpillars are shiny caterpillars adorned with zippers, which, when opened, reveal fabrics of different colors and textures. Children also spend a lot of time with their hands in the eye of the Silvergator. The eye is really an old-fashioned door bell, which rings with an alligator's roar. "It's ringing eight hours per day," says museum Public Relations Director Tricia Knoll.

The whole exhibit, now a permanent part of the museum, is a "runaway hit," says Knoll. "Parents also love it: it's a real cross-generational exhibit."

The 37-year-old Portland Children's Museum (503-248-4587), 3037 SW 2nd Avenue, is one of the older museums of its type in the country. Open every day except Mondays and holidays, it also features a toy show through January. —Ben Bestman