

Photography as art

Picture in his mind finds its way onto film

By DIANE ABRAMS

Painting pictures through photographs is a fulltime endeavor for Blake Simmons.

The self-taught photographer has experimented in a variety of media, but decided he can best express himself with a camera and roll of film.

The seven jurors for the ninth annual Somerset Invitational Art Show think so, too. Over 200 artists applied for space in the four day show, but only 37 were accepted.

Simmons and one other photographer will display their photos at the mixed media art show. The show continues through May 6 at Somerset Mall in Troy. All artists will be in attendance throughout the show. Everything on display is for sale.

"Although it would be nice to sell some photographs, my main intention is to do photography as an art form," Simmons said. "Once I establish myself in this area, I'll move on to larger cities like New York where there is more competition."

Simmons does a lot of moving around, but so far he has always found his way back to his home in Troy.

TRAVELING THROUGH Europe enabled Simmons to fill his portfolio with exotic and beautiful scenes.

The landscapes and subjects Simmons captures on film are not the only unique aspect of his work. A variety of experimental techniques separate him from other photographers.

"With the kinds of 35mm equipment that are available today, anybody can come up with a good picture, so you have to do different things to catch people's attention," Simmons said.

"I really like surrealism. Obviously I'm trying to be avant garde with some of the bizarre visuals I film."

Simmons' work is highly individualized. It's often dramatic and always strays from traditional techniques.

Many of his subjects are people he met while doing publicity work for the "Friends Road Show," a mime group based in Amsterdam, Holland. His original plans were to do photography for the group. But as it turned out, he did a lot of behind-the-scenes work such as lighting, sound, set design and costumes.

Simmons was able to utilize some of

these skills in his photography. Before shooting any film, he prepares a picture in his mind.

"I come up with an idea, script it and then get the costumes together," he explained. "I usually do my own make-up too."

THE TECHNIQUE Simmons uses is different than the traditional method of first finding a potential scene or subject to photograph, and then planning the picture.

"I used to throw my camera in the car and go out looking for things to photograph. I'd usually come home without shooting anything. After doing this a few times, I got the idea to create my own scenes."

In some cases, it's more than a picture in Simmons' mind that comes out on film. Some of his work tells a complete story.

In a five-piece series titled, "Jesture's Nightmare," Simmons uses a lot of double exposure. This creates a ghostly affect that represents a dream sequence. The subjects become transparent with the double exposure technique.

The cathedral at Marygrove College was a perfect setting for "Jesture's Nightmare," said Simmons. "Each photograph is a separate part of the whole story. Actually the process is very similar to the way in which movies are made."

Many of the same skills are implemented in both photography and movie-making. Simmons is a big admirer of Federico Fellini, a film maker known for his unusual techniques.

"Fellini uses a lot of visuals—things that are striking to the eye. This is the way he captivates his audience," he said. "I try to do the same thing with 35mm."

UNLIKE MOTION pictures, photographs remain frozen for viewers to study. The art has often been examined using much of the same criteria that is applied to paintings and drawings.

"Salvador Dali is also a great inspiration to me," said Simmons. "I frequently see ideas first as paintings, then use my camera to create the picture."

From a historical perspective, this is an opportune time for photographers, according to Simmons. The trend is for

'My photography is highly personal. It's a good release, but I also like to watch the way people react to my work. One guy told me he thought beings from outer space were trying to contact me.'

—Blake Simmons

new and different techniques that have never been used.

"Photography is really in limbo right now. It's not considered a craft and, though it's moving in that direction, it's not yet considered a fine art either," he said.

But there are many areas open to photographers, such as the commercial aspects, working with models or as an art form, which is what I'm interested in."

Simmons uses a variety of techniques while shooting and in the darkroom to achieve his effects. Many of his photographs have distorted images, created by his wide-angle lens.

He frequently creates different ef-

fects with a single photograph. Using sepia toning, Simmons can produce a photo with a gold cast. The tint adds an aging illusion that make the photograph look like it's been around for many years.

ANOTHER TECHNIQUE Simmons uses is a selective toning process. By covering areas of the photograph with rubber cement, he eliminates certain features in the final print.

Though he's never had any professional instruction, Simmons learned many tricks by trial and error.

Show hours are May 3 and 4 from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., May 5 from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and May 6 from noon to 5 p.m.



In a mime called "Pipes," two members of the Friends Road Show pose in a French village. Simmons took the photograph during a 1978 trip through Europe.

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