

CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

The ambiguous world of Jef Bourgeois

When Jef Bourgeois of Rochester called to let me know that "the authorities" in Pontiac were concerned with the subject-matter of his new exhibit, "The Wrong Show," the natural response was to cry, "Censorship!"

So like any journalist who salivates over a breaking story, I headed to Pontiac to visit Bourgeois, artist-in-resident at the Museum of Contemporary Art, which opened last January claiming to have an exhibit "the last Picasso."

■ What: "The Wrong Show: Recent Social and Political Art Gone Awry"
■ Where: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 23 W. Lawrence, Pontiac; (248) 334-6038
■ When: Through Nov. 26
MCA WARNING: Not for those easily astonished, nor prone to sudden fits of indignation.

posedly hung. The painting itself? Why bother.

The visit to the "museum," I would soon learn, was a trip through a hall of mirrors. A place more suited to the satirical artistry of Marcel Duchamp and absurdist playwrights, than anyone mining for a more traditional museum experience.

There weren't protesters outside. Although a few Bourgeois retail neighbors along Lawrence Street reportedly stopped by to take a few photos of the provocative sculptural pieces in the windows.

The one easiest to describe is a naked male doll in a bath wearing a condom. The title of the piece: "Bath-tub Jesus." "Desecration?" No way, said Bourgeois. In the age of AIDS, just good clean fun.

Another of his sculptures — a young girl doll with a hammer stuck in her head — caused a stir when some people thought it glorified child abuse. Bourgeois, who has three children, moved the sculpture away from the window.

"It's meant to bring awareness to child abuse," he mused. But this time, he doesn't smile. Rather he still finds the response perplexing.

Supposedly the Pontiac city attorney and the downtown business district association were contemplating whether Bourgeois' exhibit was more than just jarring. A comparison to the slippery notion of community decency standards was impending.

Little did the "authorities" know, there's no pinning down Bourgeois.

Truth in absurdity

The sign on the MCA door read: "Only Jews and Blacks." Bourgeois tells about a middle-aged white male who knocked on the door to register his "uncomfortableness" with the sign. How does it feel when the ridicule of racism is aimed at you? A slow "gotcha" smile came to Bourgeois. Believe me, he's full of "gotcha's."

MCA is slightly larger than the coat room at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The ideas that bounce around MCA, however, are hardly restrained by the narrow walls.

To begin with, MCA is a labyrinth of linguistics. It's a "museum," in Bourgeois's terms, because nothing is for sale and the sharp point is aimed to remind visitors that a museum should be about what one learns about oneself, not what has been deemed "important art."

While the various sculptural works appear mundane and an insider's joke, when effective, the pieces challenge the notion of what is art. And more importantly, confront viewers with the limitations of their own perceptions and prejudices.

"Why should it be OK for a museum to claim that anything it exhibits is art?" said Bourgeois. "An artist could exhibit feces on a stick and some

HOMETOWN CANVAS

Making art matter

Throwing down the gauntlet

NEA report provokes passionate debate on the arts

Editor's note: This is the first in an ongoing series of stories on the state of the arts in our communities. It is in response to "American Canvas," a report released 10 days ago by the National Endowment for the Arts, which examines the condition of nonprofit arts while presenting an ambitious agenda: To preserve the American cultural legacy.

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

Despite the popular connotation of Detroit being an aging industrial hub, there are plenty of reasons for arts advocates to feel optimistic about the prospect for growth in the arts.

Indeed, last week The Observer & Eccentric Newspapers held a round-table discussion with representatives from the local arts community, including theater, fine arts, music, dance, arts advocacy and the largest museum in the region about the "American Canvas" report released by the National Endowment for the Arts. Though most panelists hadn't had an opportunity to read the report, they were well versed on the issues it raised.

Primarily, the report considers the impact of the reduction of public funding and competition for corporate dollars; rampant commercialization; trying to appeal to an aging and changing audience; cutbacks in public arts education programs; and, the "elitist" attitudes of some artists and cultural institutions.

Not surprisingly, most of the O&E arts panelists had known each other for a long time. While metro Detroit is one of the

largest populated areas in the country, the arts community is relatively small.

The metro area, panel members noted, is the world headquarters for a range of corporations, prime targets for grants and philanthropy.

But the most stark reality, according to the panel, is that the arts exist amidst a time of expanding entertainment-leisure alternatives and fewer opportunities to educate the public on the empowering influence of the arts.

"We're in the entertainment business," said Michael Vigilant, spokesman of Meadow Brook Theatre. "There are video stores on every corner, 100 cable stations on every TV. It's not simply a case of 'if we build a theater they will come.'"

By far, the biggest challenge is identifying and attracting an audience, whether it's for a community orchestra concert or an exhibit at the Detroit Institute of Arts. In the Information Age, the prerequisite to success in the arts is apparently marketing savvy.

"Even in the best of times, we'd be talking about the issues raised in the (NEA) report," said Maury Okun, executive director of the Detroit Chamber Winds. "We're well aware that most of our audience would rather watch Monday Night Football than attend a concert."

While "American Canvas" touches on many practical concerns, it also raises the paramount issue of the role of art in American society.

"I've fought this battle for 25 years," said Carolyn Halsted, chair of the music, dance and theatre department at Oakland University in Rochester.

"We train 600 elementary school teachers every year and they don't take one art class," she said. "You have people teaching children who have no idea about what the arts are about."

The report also calls upon arts groups to become more innovative in seeking



◀ "Affluence is not a prerequisite in the arts. Nor should attendance figures be a measurement of meaningful art."

— Susanne Hilberry,
owner/director of Susanne Hilberry
Gallery in Birmingham



◀ "The report is asking the public to be involved. It's not just for arts people, but those in the corporate world and educational communities."

— Laurel Paterson,
assistant director of development and
grants, Detroit Institute of Arts



◀ "What is art in our culture? What will be the art of the next century? We don't know. We're trying to figure out what art is. People need to develop their aesthetic sensibilities."

— Carolyn Halsted,
chair of the department of music, dance
and theatre at Oakland University



◀ "If (the report) presents a crisis that leads us to broader advocacy, then something positive will come out of it. The long-term solution is to start to educate a new generation about what the arts are and how they fit in their daily lives."

— Barbara Kratchman,
executive director of ArtServe



◀ "If there's elitism in the arts, it has more to do with education or lack of exposure to the arts. We're not producing 'elitist art.'"

— Maury Okun,
executive director Detroit Chamber
Winds and the Annual Chamber Music
Festival



◀ "We're in the entertainment business... We're trying to get students and our audiences to make theatre a regular part of their lives."

— Michael Vigilant,
spokesperson, Meadow Brook Theatre



◀ "It's time to begin to organize a discussion around definable issues. Unfortunately, arts organizations often respond in a crisis mode. We have to begin to tell our story in a broader context."

— Maurice Parrish,
deputy director, Detroit Institute of Arts

EXHIBITION



STAFF PHOTO BY DAN DEAN

Biting twist: Niagara models the attitude of her living-on-the-edge female subjects in her paintings.

Niagara's girlish noir style, safe from a distance

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

Maybe it's the ever-present thick-rimmed Ray Bans covering her bloodshot eyes. Could be the skin-tight black outfit hugging her spindly frame. Or even the ashy, clenched-jaw, "I dare you," attitude.

Doesn't matter. Actually, in the spirit of the moment, nothing matters. It just seems anachronistic to see Niagara — the underground artist/rock singer whose on-stage performances are part exhibitionism, part angry catharsis — in the light of day.

But there she is looking like the Addams' family's Morticia resurrected. Posing in the bright October afternoon as a temperamental feline atop the 1966 Coupe de Ville.

Appropriately, Niagara chose her provocative pose outside of C Pop Gallery in Royal Oak, home to other "lowbrow artists" like Robert Williams and Gary Panter who have more in common with the apocalyptic visions from "Pulp Fiction" than the sedate suburban streets.

Her recent exhibit, "Faster Niagara... Kill, Kill," an exhibit of new Pop Art paintings by Niagara.

◀ **What:** "Faster Niagara... Kill, Kill," an exhibit of new Pop Art paintings by Niagara.

◀ **Where:** C Pop Gallery, 515 S. Lafayette, Suite D; (248) 398-9099

◀ **When:** Through Nov. 21

gara... Kill, Kill" had a two-night opening this weekend and featured the music of Ron Ashton, former guitarist of the seminal punk rock band, The Stooges. Ashton also played guitar in Niagara's band, Dark Carnival.

Amid the ominous overtures and living-on-the-edge subjects in her paintings, however, Niagara's defiant charm isn't nearly as threatening as it may appear. Indeed, she's presenting the hard-edge look of the fashionable dark side-style noir.

From Ralph Lauren's fashionable silver metal heels to new films "L.A. Confidential" and Oliver Stone's "U-Turn," rock and the cool underworld imagery is stylishly vague. And Niagara is both a practitioner and a preacher of the style born from the shadowy 1930s and 1940s crime film classics with themes of power, money, corruption and sexual obsession.

Incidentally, Niagara's theme can be distilled to just one of those themes — power. And more specifically, as she calls it, "girl power."

Get an attitude

"Instead of the fast-talking crime guys, I've got my girls."

Please see NIAGARA, D2

Please see CONVERSATIONS, D2

Please see DEBATE, D3