

## CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

### Broadening the range of an aesthetic experience

On one of those suddenly blustery November afternoons, the weather has definitely affected the mood of the staff at Don Thomas Sports Haus in West Bloomfield.

They couldn't be happier. Gray days and plunging temperatures means that blanket of white flaky stuff is not far behind. Snow drifts down Telegraph Road. Arctic chill swirling around 1-75.

For now, things will only get better until the dreaded spring equinox, and the unthinkable thaw.

Inside the ski shop, Don Thomas rubs his hand along the edge of a long ski, then picks up a finely crafted ski boot.

With boot in hand as a finely balanced instrument, Thomas goes into his spiel about the thrill of gliding downhill.

You know that he's given the lecture before. Must have. He's been in the business for 35 years.

When his eyes sparkle, his smile broadens and his tone softens with a steady assurance, Thomas is transformed into the parson of snow-covered hills.

Skiing is a religious experience, a snowcapped spiritual awakening.

While he doesn't claim to be a regular at symphony concerts or gallery openings, Thomas figures he knows as much about an "aesthetic experience" as the next guy.

He just has to recall the awesome natural beauty of the Colorado Rockies, or the white hills of Montana.

### Making room

For the last several years, Thomas along with other businesses at the Bloomfield Plaza have used their retail sensibilities to provide a public venue for local artists.

Displaying art inside the mall walkway at the shopping center is the Bloomfield Plaza Merchants Association modest attempt to "keep involved in the community," said Thomas, president of the association.

The current exhibit features the photography of Sarah Mae Stevens, a Seaborn High School student. Two years ago, Stevens was one of the top recipients in Kodak/Kmart's "It's a Snap" program, which awarded cameras and film to school kids.

Nationally recognized photographer Linda Solomon, a Birmingham resident and spokesperson for Kodak, has been Stevens' mentor.

For the last several years, the art work of other local students has found a place at the plaza. The work of fledgling artists in grade school and high school have been displayed.

"We just felt that we have an opportunity to encourage young people," said Thomas.

But the merchants are doing more than just providing a much-needed space. They're also providing much-needed financial support to other local art groups.

Last year, the merchants association sponsored the Birmingham Bloomfield Symphony Orchestra's recording, "Sound of the Season." The CD, recorded at Kirk of the Hills, was the best seller last holiday season at Classic Harmony Houses in Oakland County.

Two years ago, the merchants association gained wide attention for one of its Andy Warhol exhibit. Nine stores at the plaza displayed Warhol's work in their front windows.

Apparently that exhibit persuaded many merchants that displaying art was not only a good way to support local artists, but increased pedestrian traffic. Simply a case where supporting art was good for business.

After years in the retail business,

## THE NAKED TRUTH

Will figurative paintings stimulate private/public debate?

By FRANK PROVENZANO  
STAFF WRITER

It's simply asking too much not to follow the rounded lines of bare arms, legs, breasts and buttocks of Robert Schefman's curvaceous nude paintings.

"The body is an incredible and beautiful machine," said Schefman of West Bloomfield. "It's how we experience the world."

Some of the lush-colored nude compositions aren't merely sensual, but tender renderings of private, intimate gestures. Other paintings reveal subjects that people see in front of the mirror when they step from the shower, as Schefman puts it.

The issue of privacy and public mores in a pluralistic society has never been an easy discussion.

Yet to Schefman's credit, he not only demonstrates an uncanny technical



STAFF PHOTO BY DAN DEAN

**Free expression: Robert Schefman's figurative sculptures and paintings have been at the center of the debate about artistic integrity versus what is an "appropriate" public exhibit.**

Bloomfield Art Association features Schefman, a longtime faculty member, in their lecture series, "Uncensored, Uncut, Live at the BBAAI."

Two days later, the Lemberg Gallery in Birmingham features his most recent series of paintings, provocatively entitled, "Rated X."

Rest assured. The lecture and exhibit do not take a "shock approach." No need to convene a community standards panel. Schefman, the BBAAI and the Lemberg Gallery hope to appeal to reason, not offensiveness.

Besides, Schefman isn't the pushy type. He's an ardent believer in open dialogue and the democratic views of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas More, whom he often quotes.

Inspired by democratic utopian ideals, Schefman recently completed a sprawling Rivera-like mural at the Dearborn 19th District Court, entitled "A Responsibility to Each Other."

Essentially, the upcoming discussion and exhibit are modest attempts to broaden public awareness about the insidiousness of censorship and the threat to freedom of expression.

It's a subject Schefman knows quite well.

After the cover-up

As part of a group sculptural exhibit at Fordham University in the early 1980s, Schef-

man's sculpture of a male torso was destroyed by a group of students offended by the sight of frontal male nudity.

A decade later, in an exhibit held in conjunction with the 1993 First Night celebration in Birmingham, Schefman's sculpture of two male nudes,

"They Came and Preyed," was covered with a cloth.

Rather than seek a legal remedy and cry, "Censorship!" Schefman worked closely with the Birmingham Bloomfield Cultural Council, sponsors of First Night, to draft a freedom of artistic expression policy.

"It was a classic case of making lemonade from lemons," said Kathy Walgren, cultural council board member.

Today, that policy, according to Walgren, provides a framework for arts groups and exhibitors to clarify their own standards of what is acceptable to show.

"The public perception is that (galleries) accept anything," she said.

"That's not true. Artists have to conform to the gallery, or they simply keep searching for a place. It's not a case where anyone is forced to show an artist's work."

From an artist's viewpoint, however, conforming doesn't sound like too much fun.

"Whatever my subject, it's my job to provoke," said Schefman. "The worst part for an artist is self-censorship, to think someone is looking over your shoulder."

### All too human

To a great extent, the issue of censorship has surrounded the ongoing debate about federal funding for the National Endowment for the Arts.

Next fiscal year's \$98 million appropriation is two-thirds less than what the NEA received in the early 1990s. Excluded from the budget are individual artist grants, which were eliminated in the wake of the furor over NEA-funded exhibits by controversial artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano.

Further, the Clinton Administration has favored a decency provision to require the NEA to take standards of decency into account when awarding its grants.

But the direction of censorship isn't always clear.

What: "Rated X," new paintings by Robert Schefman  
When: 6-8 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 20-Saturday, Dec. 13  
Where: Lemberg Gallery, 538 North Old Woodward, Birmingham; (248) 642-6623

What: "Robert Schefman: Uncensored, Uncut, Live at the BBAAI," a lecture  
When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 18  
Where: The Birmingham Bloomfield Art Association, 1516 S. Cranbrook Road, Birmingham; (248) 644-0866

"You never know where it's coming from," said Schefman.

It was that way during the Dark Ages, the McCarthy period in the 1950s and there's a revival of censorship with the approaching millennium. The number of claims of censorship in the arts doubled from 1992 to 1994, then doubled again from 1994 to 1996, according to Schefman.

Two years ago, for instance, photos taken by Marilyn Zimmerman, a photography instructor at Wayne State, were confiscated. Authorities claimed that Zimmerman's photos of her adolescent daughter were pornographic. While the accusation did not stick, the damage to her reputation hasn't been repaired.

This past week, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Pontiac was petitioned by the North Oakland Family Mental Health Center to change - or remove from the front window - the surreal sculpture, "Hatrack," a pint-size mannequin with panties pulled down around its feet and a man's hat in place of a torso.

The Family Mental Health Center claimed the sculpture was "upsetting" to its clients, many of whom are victims of domestic abuse.

The sculpture is now covered with a sheet. But not before the museum/gallery encouraged its detractors to pursue an open dialogue

Please see NAKED, D2

## EXHIBITION

### In the days of glitzy imagery...Photography unplugged

By FRANK PROVENZANO  
STAFF WRITER

"Evidence: Photography and Site" not only offers a voyeur's delight, but raises a Kodak moment to a whole new level.

Unlike much of contemporary fine-art photography, which often resorts to appropriations, constructed tableaux and digital manipulations, the images in the Cranbrook Art Museum exhibit offer a straightforward appreciation of nature's mirror.

What's happening on the mirror's flip side, well, that's another matter altogether.

"The power of photography shows us that the camera sees so much more than what the eye sees," said Irene Hofmann, assistant curator at Cranbrook who coordinated the exhibit with the Wexner Museum in Columbus, Ohio, where "Evidence" premiered in February.

"There isn't any manipulation, and most of the work is shot with natural light," said Hofmann. "These artists show the relationship between photography and the truth."

Apparently, that's "truth" with a small "t," as in "Your point of view is just as valid as my point of view."

In the court of logic, however, "Evidence" can be accused of stating the obvious: a camera and film may document objective reality, but as long as the equipment is in the hands of a *Homo sapiens*, the



Passing world: Photographer Thomas Struth's records a blurred instant of time along the streets of China.

perspective will be strictly subjective.

That's hardly a profound revelation.

But on a more serious level, there's plenty of evidence that the Wexner has assembled the equivalent of "Photography Unplugged," a scaled-down version of the art form, which too often relies on tricky manipulations.

What: "Photography and Site," an exhibit of nine contemporary photographic artists - Merry Alperin, Stephen Barker, Uta Barth, Lynne Cohen, Esko Mannikko, Margaret Morton, Lorne Simpson, Thomas Struth and Hiroshi Sugimoto  
When: Through Sunday, Jan. 4  
Where: Cranbrook Art Museum, 1223 N. Woodward Avenue, Bloomfield Hills; (248) 645-3323

Hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday; 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday

Admission: \$4, adults; \$2, full-time students, children and senior citizens  
Note: "Fragments Toward A City," an exploration of the nature of a city, featuring six Cranbrook photographic artists, runs concurrently with "Photography and Site" at the art museum.

Featuring the diverse work of nine artists, the most interesting feature of "Evidence" is the multi-layered photographs filled with details, mystery and eccentricities.

### Details of the landscape

From established photographers like Lorna Simpson and Hiroshi Sugimoto to up-and-comers Stephen Barker and Uta Barth, "Evidence" provides intriguing images of people captured in their element, and

Please see EXHIBITION, D2