

SCREEN SCENE

Student artists give holidays a different spin



ANN DELISI

On the computer screen of your mind, what icons appear when you think of the holidays? OK, it's a loaded question. (I'm even assuming that you're running Windows in your head.) If Bill Gates hasn't gotten hold of your synapses yet...

But on tonight's Backstage Pass at 9:30 p.m. on Detroit Public Television, we'll see how a group of artists tackled the perceptions of holiday season. A well-known annual event, donations and purchases from the Detroit Artists Market's (DAM) Holiday Exhibition help support the gallery's exhibition and educational programs, as well as generate revenue for participating artists. But this year's event, "Un-Defining... the Holidays," implied a twist. So we put our crack Backstage Pass pop culture correspondent Lex Kuhne of the case.

Sure enough, Lex reports that the DAM has put a new layer atop an old favorite, "Un-Defining... the Holidays" is really two exhibits: The first is what they've done for 36 years, which is to present wonderful works of

local art for sale as gifts during the holiday season. "The second exhibit puts the whole concept of gift-giving into pop-cultural context. Students from Wayne State, the Center for Creative Studies, and other schools provide their unique take on the holidays — through their generational filter."

Think about the generation of young artists in question. It's a unique group. Due to social changes, they have been the first generation of children not just raised with television, but raised by television. And while the same may be true of children of the 1960s, the explosion of mushrooming media options — zillion-channel cable servers, satellite TV, video games (other than Pong), the Internet, et al — attenuated any sense of shared seasonal experience with the past. That's where this year's VHS copy of "A Charlie Brown Christmas" any time they want, so it's no longer an anticipated annual event that generates excited playground discussion.

"From these installations it's clear that these students' impression of the holiday pretty much exclusively has come through the media images they've seen growing up," Lex says. "So you have multimedia displays of Christmas themes,

including a Santa Claus taking a nap over four monitors, tape loops of choice moments from classic Christmas shows we grew up with, and remarkable murals including one of Santa with DJ headphones and a gold tooth. Norman Rockwell, it's not."

Speaking of traditions, our Backstage Pass film correspondent, Elliot Wilhelm of the Detroit Film Theatre at the Detroit Institute of Arts, will give us the scoop on his venue's latest offering, Spike & Mike's Festival of Animation. Says Elliot, "Spike & Mike's began in 1977, so this is its 20th anniversary, with 15 short films of animation this year. Some are Oscar

winners and nominees, and most have appeared at festivals all over the world. Spike & Mike's is the foremost touring package of short animated films. The program is extremely popular here, as it is everywhere."

But why a festival of animated shorts? "You have to put animation into context. There used to be an expectation associated with arthouse or experimental exhibition. When I was running the Wayne State Cinema Guild in 1966, audiences expected some shorts — experimental animated films from the world over — and we'd show two or three of them prior to the feature. That's changed. In fact, audi-

ences have become quite resistant. It's just the way exhibition has gone. But there's still an enormous audience for animation. What's become increasingly popular lately is to put short animation from around the world together for a festival. In that context, these short films are more popular than ever."

It's a fabulously expressive medium. The great thing about animation is that you can show almost anything that you can imagine. Now that's a part of feature film as well. The lines really have blurred between live action and animation. Many feature films have a sort of invisible animation in them. When computer animation started people said it

wasn't really drawing, so it wasn't really animation, and it wasn't true at all. It's just another tool. It's always a kind of revolutionary process. Tonight, Elliot will give us a peek at the next revolution in art animation film.

Also on the show, Gary Graff will host pop quartet Dog's Eye View in the Detroit Public Television studio, and local favorite and internationally acclaimed flautist Alexander Zonjic will get us in the holiday spirit with variations on "Greensleeves." That's all on Backstage Pass, tonight at 9:30 (repeated at 1:30 a.m.) on Detroit Public Television, Channel 56.

TV special features
Chenilles, local actors

WDIV-TV is celebrating the spirit of the holidays with a special Walk on the Wild Side program featuring the Chenille Sisters and local actors.

The Chenille Sisters and the Secret of the Box airs 8 p.m. Monday, Dec. 22 and at noon on Thursday, Dec. 25.

The story transports the Chenille sisters and a cast of local actors including Jackie Marna of Canton as Uncle Avic, Marlee Green, 9 of Birmingham and Nathan Keen, 9 of Beverly Hills all over the world in search of the true meaning of the holiday season.

From the Detroit Zoo to an African jungle where the story characters meet elephants, zebras and lions; to the frozen Arctic for an encounter with a

polar bear. "The Secret of the Box" features eight favorite Chenille songs including "Out of Africa," and "Polar Bear Stomp." A ninth song was composed for the special. Portions of the special were taped at the Detroit Zoo and of specially-created set at WDIV.

Walk on the Wild Side is WDIV's year-long project with the Detroit Zoo. The project has included a series of prime time specials, news stories and vignettes which have encouraged the public to explore and enjoy the natural resources around us.

The story was conceived and written by Rose Morand, in collaboration with the Chenille Sisters — Cheryl Dowdy, Connie Huber and Grace Morand.

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