

Rivers revels in stream of attention

Hours after he performed his final duties as juror in the Michigan Fine Arts Competition on Thursday, Larry Rivers held court.

The occasion was the opening of his exhibit, "The Master's Eye," at the Kidd Gallery in Birmingham, held in conjunction with the statewide competition.

At an informal news conference, Rivers explained how he paints from photographs, sees his influence in the work of today's artists, prefers drawing over painting and loves to play his saxophone as much as stand before a canvas.

Succinct and definitive answers don't flow easily from the artist with a reputation for his rebellious flair.

The enigmatic Rivers, wearing a well-worn jacket held together by threads, strode into the packed gallery filled with media, art collectors and admirers.

Even at 74, Rivers walks with an athletic bounce, and hasn't

lost any luster of his famously intense glare. And he still bears a striking resemblance to Dennis Hopper and Michael Douglas.

With the deaths last year of Willem de Kooning and Roy Lichtenstein, Rivers is one of the few remaining influential American artists from the fertile 1950s.

In many ways, Rivers is a transitional figure. His drawings and paintings reflect the cathartic emotion of abstract expressionism and the contemporary tone of pop art.

But foremost, Rivers is the archetypal bohemian artist, remaining noncommittal about nearly everything, but his art.

And clearly, Rivers isn't interested in history.

"I'm not an evolutionist, I don't think about how art has changed from then to now," he said.

Everything to know about Rivers is in his art. And for the more literal minded, the details of his life are in his scintillating

1992 unauthorized autobiography, "What Did I Do?"

In tone and style, the exhibit at the Kidd Gallery captures the warm energy and sexuality that pervades nearly every Rivers piece.

Often overlooked is Rivers' masterful draftsmanship. He seldom misses a chance to evoke a sensual relationship among his subjects and a palette of bold, yet nourishing hues.

A few of the more familiar images include pieces from his Art and Artist series, featuring Picasso, Gauguin and Matisse as they work. The famous artists are depicted on Rivers' trademark three-dimensional canvases.

With his 12-year-old son at his side, Rivers charmed the crowd with his unpretentiousness. He kept his hand close to his chest with current fans or the work of contemporary artists.

When his son was asked to name his favorite artist, he



Signature: Barbara Broad of West Bloomfield, left, waits for Larry Rivers to sign a copy of a book of his drawings and paintings. The reception was held Thursday at the Kidd Gallery in Birmingham.

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down a 9-to-5 job. Vernia is a chef at Neiman Marcus.

Meanwhile, Hackett, who is represented by the Cary Gallery in Rochester, prepares exhibits at the Meadow Brook Gallery.

A bench head

The collaboration among the artists who share Clinton River Studios comes in the form of encouragement, and a healthy dose of peer pressure.

"They kept bugging me to finish my pieces before the show," said Vernia.

Upon looking at the slides of Vernia's work, Hackett suggests that "we take new shots" of Vernia's abstract paintings.

"Your work is all about color," he said. The photos don't quite reflect that, he implied.

Vernia agreed.

Collaboration is inseparable from friendship.

In many ways, the artistic activity at Clinton River Studios sounds like club-house vernacular. Stories abound about living the bohemian life.

Clinton River Studios is as much a state of mind and a physical location. A refuge for

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all represented. Any semblance of a common aesthetic is mere coincidence.

Years ago, a statewide arts competition might have depicted scenes of lighthouses, paintings of the sylvan north, bears, Wolverines, lumberjacks or images of massive freighters, steaming trains and monotonous assembly lines.

Not today.

The Michigan Fine Arts Competition is a reminder that in the cyber age, the notion of regionalism has drifted untethered into the cyber abyss.

Regional artistic differences in a high-tech, Internet-bound America have been stirred into a pluralistic melting pot.

Listen closely, P.T. Barnum can be heard calling, "There's something for everyone." And in the spirit of the day, the buzz word that best describes the Michigan Fine Arts Competition is "eclectic."

Masterful impressions

The show features masterful charcoal drawings, somber still life paintings, lush pastels, cleverly composed mixed media, a few figurative and daffy pop sculptures, and passing views of a withering Americana in the

form of oil paintings of diners, a corner grocery store and a dingy cafe.

Several pieces stand out:

- "Canine Future," a large-scale encaustic painting by Marco Garcia of Ann Arbor. The shadowy images of a man and woman locked into an excruciating stride captures a neo-expressionist technique with a flowing sensuality.
- David Rayfield's male/female nude black and white photographs, which not only demonstrate technical mastery of form, tone and composition, but present a provocative simplicity.
- "Manequin 2," a triptych by photographer Linda Soberman of Huntington Woods. Despite its similarity to avant-garde artist Cindy Sherman's work, the haunting images reflect Soberman's uncompromising artistic vision.
- "Tablescape II," an acrylic on canvas demonstrates Patrick McCay's ability to combine surrealism with a daunting use of light. McCay is the new dean at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit.
- A large-scale mixed-media by Lenore Gimpert of Birmingham, which demonstrates her emerging confidence and moody

graphic style.

Other noteworthy efforts include:

- The perfectly executed charcoal drawing, "Oryx," by Laurie Ann Bouley of Bloomfield Hills.
- The swirling painting of a vintage auto by Tom Hale of Northville.
- The cardboard wall of houses by Terry Melnick of West Bloomfield.
- A brass sculpture, "Minyan," by Henry Friedman of West Bloomfield.
- Dianne Burkhardt's charcoal rendering of a diner and a cafe.
- The control of the many verdant hues in a painting of a northern Michigan highway by Howard Dobrowolski of Redford.

Other local artists in the competition include: Marilyn Gorman of Birmingham; Suzanne Aberly, Danielle Bodine, Liz Mack, Girja Viananath, Karen Wydra of Bloomfield Hills; Jeri Fellwock, Harriet Gelfond, Pamela Giurlanda of Farmington Hills; Sophia Rivkin of Southfield; Lillian Moran of Troy; and, Elizabeth Crank, Deborah Rader, Darcy Scott of West Bloomfield.

Creating momentum

Ultimately, the Michigan Fine

Arts Competition is a reminder of the few opportunities for native sons and daughters to show their work in Michigan.

"The BBAA is willing to make a commitment to local artists," said Lester Johnson, Jr., professor of fine arts at Center for Creative Studies and an instructor at the BBAA.

"Artists work in isolation. They must see how their work is received," he said.

Without a contemporary arts museum in the region, many art associations along with university galleries have become the only regular venues to show the work of local artists.

In order to raise the profile of Michigan artists, the BBAA has enlisted the support of a range of corporate sponsors.

With an increase in prize money, and a big-name juror, the exhibit has taken on the appearance of a major social-cultural event.

That translates into the type of excitement indicative of a thriving art scene.

"A lot of artists move away because there's not enough opportunities here," said Johnson.

"This annual show definitely creates momentum."



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young peasant, Tonio, who becomes a soldier to win the support of the regiment (especially Sgt. Sulpipe). But the ways of true love do not run smooth when the Marquise of Birkenfeld claims Marie as her niece and wants her to marry someone else. Of course, things work out well in the end. This is a happy comedy and a happy company.

Ward is enjoying the camaraderie on stage and off.

"The great thing is, I get to sing with our principals," he said. "There is a marvelous duet with the leading lady ('In the heat of battle') at the beginning that sums up our relationship. She has all the high notes, and I just get to sing through."

In the second act, Ward sings a trio with the two leads that is playfully set around being pho-

The opera is famous for Tonio's Act 1 aria ("Since the moment") which contains nine high Cs and helped solidify Luciano Pavarotti's reputation.

tographed.

"Vocally, it's not that great a challenge, more of a bass role, but it's a lot of notes," he said.

Ward said he's never sung Sulpipe before but the role already seems familiar to him.

"It does seem like it would be fun to do over and over again, he's so supportive," Ward said, who added that the company's core roles that fit his optimistic personality.

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The tenor's big moment is always a show stopper, Ward said.

"But it's surprising, he has another aria in the second act in which he expresses his love for Maria that may be even more beautiful. The tenor's voice sings it so beautifully," he said.

Five tenors are being used on tour, including Michigan native Matthew Chellia, who will join the company in Ann Arbor. Four singers are sharing the role of

Mario.

Ward is a native of New Jersey who had intended to become a minister. "I was a lawyer until he went to New York and rediscovered music."

"I did 'Pippen' in summer stock and said, 'This is what I want to do with my life,'" he said. "I've always loved opera. As a child I had sung 'Magic Flute' and 'Amahl.' It hooked me," he said.

So now he's on the bus, one of three used by the company, and taking side trips to Graceland and Beale Street in Memphis, visiting friends and trying to avoid the biggest road danger of all.

"I read, shop, that's a big one, very dangerous. Our luggage seems to grow, little things build up," he said.

The company is looking forward to Ann Arbor, a regular and favorite stop, he said. In addition to performing the company will be offering several educational programs while on campus.

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Tabloid news be damned. Pethos' exhibit reminds us that there's substance behind the fashion, glitz and gossip.

Put aside the cynicism. Think of it as beating the odds.

Here are the exhibit details:

What: "Five Dresses of Lady Diana, Princess of Wales"

When: 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., Tuesday-Sunday, March 10-15

Where: Cranbrook Art Museum, 1221 N. Woodward Avenue, Bloomfield Hills

Previous event - Monday,

March 9: Women 2 Women will co-host tea event, noon, 2, 4 p.m.; and, champagne reception 6 and 8 p.m. A lecture and slide presentation will be given by Ellen Petho. Tickets: \$50 for tea event, \$125 for champagne reception; (248) 645-3361, (248) 645-6666.

NOTE: Proceeds from all the exhibits will go to charities benefiting children.

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