

# Arts & Leisure

By: Kooly Wygnik, Editor 734-953-1205 on the web: http://observer-eccentric.com Sunday, May 31, 1998

• TWO DISTINCTIVE, BUT COMPLEMENTARY PAINTERS AT POSNER GALLERY •

## A philosophy that runs deep

For two highly expressive artists capable of translating color, texture and form into soulful emotion, Joseph Bernard and Helen Febbo are downright laconic when it comes to talking about their art. "Wow, I know why I chose to paint," said Bernard, shaking his head while searching to find the words to explain the inspiration for his incantatory collages.

Febbo offers a mystical yet intimate explanation.

**WHAT:** "Two Painters," the works of Helen Evens Febbo and Joseph Bernard  
**WHERE:** Through Wednesday, June 24  
**WHERE:** Posner Gallery, 523 N. Old Woodlind, Birmingham  
**HOURS:** 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, (248) 647-2552

ages and sensuous abstract-figurative paintings, respectively.

In form and feeling, however, Bernard and Febbo's sophisticated works in "Two Painters" at the Posner Gallery in Birmingham are distinctively different.

On the surface, it seems that the artists have little in common. Their styles do not intersect or come from a similar tradition. Nor do they share a preference for materials or self-evident motifs.

For his well-wrought collages on wood, Bernard appears much like a dogged excavator sifting through a pond of memories to create his own vibrantly colored associations. And for her passionate free-flowing female nudes, Febbo considers herself much like a traveler on the Montana range searching for the open vista.

"I feel like I'm getting away from past restrictions," she said. "Everyone is searching for a sense of freedom, to get to the real meaning in life."

That journey for Bernard and Febbo is documented in their paintings.

**Thrill of discovery**  
Alternatively painting, sanding and placing wafer-shaped pods in the center of the wooden surface, Bernard continually adds and



Abstract figure: Helen Febbo's "Sitting on a Stone Wall" combines gestural lines drawn in charcoal with a background that is indistinguishable from her subject.



Colorfully fertile: Joseph Bernard's "Green Gold" intricate collage incorporates organic materials, layers of paint and a coat of urethane.

diminishes to his work. "You don't want to be too conscious of what you're doing," said Bernard, a professor of contemporary art at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit.

In a 10 year period from the mid 1970s, Bernard was recognized as one of the most prolific and innovative video artists along with Brakhage and Acconci.

"It all comes back to painting, pulling things together," he said. Much like arranging and rearranging memories.

"In some cases, I'll bury an image, then sand down to it and bring it back. The thrill is in the discovery."

Meanwhile, Febbo, who taught printmaking at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, has moved into a new direction.

Her intent in painting abstract female nudes, she said, is to portray the inextricability between a subject and background.

In technique, she lays down the gestural lines in charcoal of her subject, then blurs those lines by painting over them.

The effect is quietly engaging. "The mystery, for me, is how we're all ever-changing," said Febbo.



Layered: The paintings of Joseph Bernard, left, and Helen Febbo are distinctively different, but the integrity and depth of their work offer complementary perspectives of artists searching for deeper meaning in their lives.

### Depth of experience

Too often, in the art world, much like in life, there is a sensation that anyone approaching 60 is slowing down, preparing to retire. Don't talk to Bernard, 56, and Febbo, 57, about acting their age. They haven't even broken a sweat.

While their creations are clearly influenced by post-modernist artists like Susan Rothenberg's sensual abstractions and Julian Schnabel's reconstructed collages, Bernard and Febbo are secure with their own expressions.

Neither pays too much attention to the latest trends.

"I stick to what I know," said Febbo. "Everything you do in art has to do with your life."

Each painter has found ways to recommit themselves to their art. In early June, Bernard will make his annual pilgrimage to the shores of Provincetown, where he'll spend days collecting seaweed and those wafer-shaped organic elements that form the centerpiece of his collages.

In the next year, Febbo expects to cutback on teaching to spend more time in her Pontiac studio, where she plans to adapt her abstract human forms to sculpture.

Bringing together two of the area's most respected and well-known artists at the Posner Gallery proves to be one of this year's most pleasant surprises in the local gallery scene.

Never to bow in a trend or cut-

Please see DEEP, C2



Sing-along: "A Kids World," a CD of 10 songs, combines catchy melodies with positive messages.

### Heading west with a plan and a dream

The house is sold. The car is packed and idling in the driveway. Time to buckle up the kids. Then, all that will remain for B.J. Lect of Bloomfield Hills is to get behind the wheel and drive westward to the point where the mountains meet the ocean.

While some never find the time or will power to leave the routine of their lives, Lect has set aside a 20-year sales career and the comfort of familiar environs for pursuing his dream in the shade overlooking Palm Springs.

In typical adult career-minded fashion, Lect is giving his musical dream two months to succeed.

By then, he estimates, the newly released CD, "A Kids World," will be filling the racks at Walmart, Target and Toys 'R Us stores around the country.

With an additional 100,000 copies of the CD ordered to meet emerging demand in countries as far away as Australia and Thailand, Lect may not see the sunshine too often this summer.

**Positively persuasive**  
The delightful singalongs and lullabies on the 10-song CD are produced by Snokey Robinson's former bass player Wayne Tweed, who founded the recording label, Tree House Records, based in Inylwild, Calif.

Lect, who managed Tweed's early musical career, gives a simple reason for packing up and becoming marketing director for Tree House Records.

"It's the music," he said. "When you see kids react to the music, you can't help but feel excited about the possibilities."

Lyrics and a hum-along melody, contends Lect, are powerfully persuasive to callow minds.

"There are enough problems with simply growing up without listening to the suggestive stuff in gangsta rap," he said.

In Lect's thinking, music is the panacea to build self-esteem, and to combat self-destructive noise.

For instance, in "Do the Best You Can," lyricist Staci Spector relates a simple, but timeless message: "If it's not right the first time go for it a second time/and if you need another time/well, that's OK, it's still fine./But just you remember stick to your plan/and do the best you can."

That kind of common wisdom set to a catchy melody also offers a reminder to adults.

### Beyond the water's edge

"A Kids World" has already been integrated into public school systems in California, said Lect, who is scheduled to address the upcoming state PTA convention.

The collection of songs has been carefully structured around positive messages, and an accompanying workbook has been designed to stimulate a child to think as well as sing, he said.

In the near future, Lect expects to attract recording artists to the Tree House label, develop a merchandise line, and expand options on their web site.

But clearly, the targeted consumers are parents who believe that navigating their children in the Information Age is like paddling with a straw in a raging sea.

Somewhere between the days of watching "Barney" and the onset of puberty, the world seems to lose its magic for too many kids.

Unfortunately, kids are growing up without growing wiser. The condition is all too common: today's kids are benumbed by images of gratuitous violence and music inspired by anger, rather than enlightenment.

"A Kids World" reminds us that childhood is a time of wonder and possibilities.

For Lect, "A Kids World" is a real-life singalong. He's set out to prove that if you suspend all those negative thoughts, your dreams won't end at the water's edge.

## Economics of culture hot topic at Mackinac Island conference

Maybe it's the plush Grand Hotel setting on the historic island at the passage of Lakes Michigan and Huron. Perhaps it's the notion that there's a pleasant ferry trip to the mainland standing between them and day-to-day office pressures.

Whatever the reason, political, civic and business leaders at this weekend's annual Mackinac Conference, sponsored by the Greater Detroit Chamber

of Commerce, are sounding uncharacteristically like arts advocates.

Unlike in past years when discussions focused on job creation and diversifying the regional economy, this year the major debates pertain to improving the quality of life and cultural amenities in metro Detroit.

With the combination of the fledgling entertainment hub in downtown Detroit and a reduction in public funds

to cultural institutions, the thrust of the discussion among the state's top political and business leaders is - what else? - arts funding.

The timing, some contend, couldn't be better.

After nearly two years of a logjam on the implementation of a tri-county cultural tax, there's definite movement on

Please see CONFERENCE, C2

What: Senate Bill 1136 designed to establish a metropolitan region council to levy a property tax up to .5 mill. Net revenue would be earmarked for cultural institutions, arts groups and recreational facilities within tri-county area.

Status: Introduced in the Michigan Senate by Sen. Michael Bouchard (R-Birmingham) For an analysis of the bill, call the Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency, (517) 373-5383.

### FILM

## Gulf War Syndrome docu-drama looks eerily familiar



Smoking gun? Actual war footage is included in the docu-drama that explores the struggle of veterans suffering from Gulf War Syndrome.

In the span of weeks during January 1991, a tidy aerial bombing campaign disabled the Iraqi army occupying Kuwait. Soon, the U.S. military's high-tech tactical efficiency during the short-lived Gulf War was widely praised. Accordingly, bellicose rhetoric and victory parades followed.

For many veterans, however, the real war began when they returned home. And the enemy became an all-too-familiar behemoth - the U.S. Pentagon.

The ongoing struggles of Gulf War veterans suffering from mysterious post-battle illnesses, known as Gulf War Syndrome, is the subject of Shwetime's controversial "Thanks of a Grateful Nation," which airs tonight and Thursday, June 11.

While soldiers began complaining of chronic fatigue, rashes, headaches and digestive problems shortly after returning from the Persian Gulf, it wasn't

until then Democrat U.S. senator from Michigan Don Riegle conducted formal investigations that there was an eerie sense of history repeating itself.

"When we began getting into our investigation, it was 'We've been here before,'" said Riegle, referring to the Pentagon's reluctance to admit that U.S. soldiers in Vietnam were exposed to agent orange, a toxic herbicide.

Riegle of Birmingham retired in 1994 after serving three terms in the senate and five terms in the House of Representatives. He currently serves as deputy chair of Shandwick International, a worldwide public relations firm with a local office in Southfield.

"If Colin Powell or Swartzhoff were sick with Gulf War Syndrome, you could bet that cost would be no object," he said.

Please see DOCU-DRAMA, C3



Deadly vapors: Although U.S. soldiers have proven that they were exposed to toxic chemicals during the Persian Gulf War, the Pentagon has been reluctant to confirm the veterans' claims.