

## CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

### Lawrence Street has an open door - for now

Near the corner of Auburn Road and Livernois stands the oldest living oak tree of its kind in the country. Its thick, deep fissures and sprawling boughs present a steadfast reminder of the strength and wisdom of age.

The oak is the subject of one of Alice Allhoff's charcoal drawings. For the retired art teacher and president of the Lawrence Street Gallery in downtown Pontiac, the centuries-old tree is the ideal image of permanency and experience in an ever-changing world.

Unfortunately, the permanency of the gallery where Allhoff's artwork is displayed is another matter. The gallery, still a sapling in oak tree years, is facing a crisis as severe as a drought.

#### Heed the call

After a year of slow traffic into the gallery and a dwindling membership, Lawrence Street faces the ultimate notice by the end of this month. If it doesn't increase the membership of artists at its cooperative, the doors will close.

"We're artists, not business people," said Allhoff.

"All of us would rather be working on our art. But we all realize that we all need a place to show our work on a regular basis."

#### Call for Artists

Wanted: Artists interested in joining arts cooperative. Fee: \$65/month. Where: Lawrence Street Gallery, 6 N. Saginaw, Pontiac; (248) 334-6716

That's what this gallery has meant to us."

Ironically, as Lawrence Street faces possibly closing, the basic cooperative arrangement of the gallery is an idea that's

needed now as much as ever.

All that's needed is for artists to heed the call.

#### Not taking easy way

Until recently, Lawrence Street was operated by 17 artists who paid a monthly fee and shared the workload at the gallery. Members take turns ordering supplies, greeting visitors, and sending out flyers for new exhibits.

But half of the 17 artists have decided not to renew their membership. The reasons, Allhoff pointed out, range from members moving out of the area to artists deciding to retire. The age range of members is 35-60 years of age with most of artists leaning on the older end of the scale.

"It seems younger artists are working to support themselves, and they don't have the time to join a cooperative," said Allhoff.

The predicted effect of fewer members is that Lawrence Street will soon find a shortage of revenue and workers in its gallery.

For a gallery that doesn't take a commission and only makes money through dues and occasional rentals of one of its five galleries, that's like taking an axe to the trunk of an old oak.

"The easiest thing would be to close," said Allhoff.

"But we believe that the opportunity for artists is so important."

#### Impending deadline

Time is running out. Not just for Lawrence Street, but for any artist with an aspiration to have their work regularly displayed in a gallery.

By the end of the month, Allhoff and the other artists will have to decide whether the odds favor bringing in at least 10 new members. That hardly seems insurmountable in a metro area.

But the cooperative commitment isn't always convenient. So, Lawrence Street is conducting a sort of blanket "call for artists," approaching local art associations to enlist members.

Since 1987, the space - first along Lawrence Street then at its current site on Saginaw Street - has given many artists a regular place to exhibit their work.

"It's given me legitimacy," said Sue

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## A Figurative Statement



Broad vision: John Cynar, curator of exhibits at Paint Creek Center for the Arts, has assembled works by many of the most influential artists in Michigan.

By FRANK PROVENZANO

STAFF WRITER

fprovenza@home.com.net

For an exhibit entitled "Body & Soul" what would you expect? Idyllic landscapes? Warm fuzzy portraits? Take a closer look. To examine the condition of the body and soul at the razor's edge of the millennium something grittier and unflinchingly honest is in order.

"Body & Soul" at Paint Creek Center for the Arts in Rochester offers a panoramic view of 76 of the most influential and compelling Michigan artists inspired by the human figure.

Interpretations range from quite literal to satirical to abstractions whereby the human form can only be remotely imagined. The only semblance of a common theme is that for these artists, the human body is both a metaphor, and essentially, a self-portrait.

Yes, there are plenty of bare breasts, buttocks - finely shaped and droopy - and frontal nudity. But at last look, there was no evidence of elephant dung, religious desecration, or animal parts suspended in formaldehyde. Rudolph Giuliani-types can breathe a sigh of relief.

Actually, for that matter, there is nothing remotely shocking in "Body & Soul," except, of course, that exhibit curator John Cynar could find time to travel to about 70 artists' studios and assemble such an impressive show in less than three months.

"This exhibit is the biggest celebration of influential work (of the human figure) to come out of Detroit," said Cynar of Birmingham. "Generally, there's very little exposure given to these artists."

#### Drawn to form

The focus on the human figure continues to gain popularity among artists. Jeff Borgeau, a visual artist from Rochester Hills who is also a member of Paint Creek's exhibitions committee, contends that's largely due to the

widespread popularity of fine art photography and the increasingly esoteric nature of contemporary art.

"Many artists are reinterpreting what is considered the most identifiable of all forms, the human figure," he said.

Apparently, focusing on the human form allows artists to appeal to a universal image while not necessarily making work that is as immediately accessible as commercial graphics.

To its credit, in scope and quality "Body & Soul" has the sensibility of a museum-like exhibit. Cynar's intent is to document and promote local artists. And simply on that level, he deserves accolades for his vision and persistence.

"I didn't want to take an academic approach, but I did want to show a lineage among the artists," said Cynar. "People are drawn to the human form because psychologically we understand it. Yet I also wanted to be open to the odd and different interpretation."

It's hardly a coincidence that Cynar would spearhead this type of comprehensive exhibit. He was also one of the organizing forces behind the last, compelling exhaustive exhibit, "Pontiac '97." That show two years ago included works of more than 80 local sculptors displayed in 11 sites around Pontiac.

#### Human touch

Overall, "Body & Soul" presents the human body as an anatomical subject, an object to be deconstructed, and a form through which to address aesthetic, philosophical, psychological and political issues.

The styles of artistic expression run the gamut from Rodin-like sculptures to de Kooning-inspired abstract expressionism to highly sensual depictions, such as photographer David Rayfield's two symmetrical nudes, or painter John Hegarty's contemplative naked female standing before a mirror.

Anyone who has paid attention to the local art scene over the last three decades will find that "Body & Soul" pays homage to many of the influential art teachers and artists, some who continue to live in the area and some who've moved on, and to the great beyond.

Notable artists whose work reflects technical mastery include Robert Wilbert, Sergio DeGiusti, Robert Scheffman, Charles Pomplius, Stanley Rosenthal, Stephen Goodfellow, Sybil Oshinski, M. C. Lynn Zimmerman, Robert Seastock, George Rissick and the late Martin Maddox, whose oil painting, "Sisters," is an indelible portrait for its psychological depth, mesmerizing palette and composition.

Then there are a handful of influential artists whose work appears more allegorical and surrealist, such as Ed Fraga and Mel Ross. And there are

Please see BODY, C5

### 'Body & Soul'

exhibit documents influential Michigan artists



Contemplative: Robert Wilbert's painting style demonstrates a subtle mastery that has inspired many of his students at Wayne State University.

## Brilliant pianist opens season for Music Guild

Pianist Sergei Babayan is one of the cultural jewels made possible by the melting of the Cold War.

The Armenian-born Babayan, educated in Russia, immigrated to the U.S. in 1989, and within two years proceeded to win four of the most prestigious international piano competitions. He became a U.S. citizen in late September.

Babayan, an extraordinary technician who teaches at the Cleveland Institute of Music, opens the 49th season for the Cranbrook Music Guild.

The concert this Tuesday at the Cranbrook House features a selection of pieces from Rachmaninoff and J.S. Bach's "The Goldberg Variations," and an Aria with Diverse Variations in G.

But perhaps the biggest surprise of the evening will be Babayan's interpretation of Australian composer Carl Vine's "Sonata in Two Movements," which opens the program.

The virtually unknown composition is tailored to Babayan's virtuosity. Vine's demanding, highly imaginative piece is a showcase for Babayan's speed, strength and precision, while it



Dynamic: Pianist Sergei Babayan opens the 49th season for the Cranbrook Music Guild on Tuesday.

also demonstrates the pianist's remarkable light touch.

Throughout his career, critics have often cited Babayan's ability to interpret a variety of motifs without sounding mechanical or rigid.

In the summer of 1998, Babayan appeared with the Detroit Symphony at Meadowbrook Music Festival.

Next month's Cranbrook Music Guild concert features another up-and-coming artist, cellist Shauna Rolsman, who appeared at Cranbrook House two years ago as a member of the St. Lawrence String Quartet.

Rolsman, who has been compared to cellist Jacqueline du Pré, brings a Shostakovich Twin-set appeal often lacking in the classical music world. Her concert is scheduled for Tuesday, Nov. 9.

The remaining concerts on the Cranbrook Music Guild schedule include:

- Pacifica Quartet, Dec. 4
- Mellora Winds, Feb. 1
- Ysaque Quartet, March 28
- Cellist Colin A. Beck, April 25

Frank Provenzano, Staff Writer

## THEATER REVIEW

### Joseph's dreamcoat shows its colors

Stagecrafters presents "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" through Oct. 10 at the Baldwin Theatre, 410 S. Lafayette, Royal Oak. Tickets \$14-\$16. Call (248) 541-6450.

By JON KATZ

SPECIAL WRITER

There's an inherent genius in "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." And we don't mean Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber.

It's his musical itself. Born as a 20-minute church project more than 30 years ago, "Joseph" has morphed through many variations of complexity and cast sizes and is still being performed in several of them. A sixth-grade class can put on a perfectly delightful mini-Joseph, and you can hook your jewels for the family to see the inflated "Joseph" coming to town next month. That's the genius of "Joseph."

Most productions of the biblical pop opera fall somewhere in between. Even so, while the libretto leaves little to interpretation, the presentation itself offers the kind of latitude that makes every production different. It therefore becomes not so much an actor's show as a director's and set designer's showcase.

Stagecrafters' season-opener is the conception of Dan Rose, who performs both off-stage functions. And

Sold into slavery and imprisoned in Egypt, Joseph wins Pharaoh's favor by explaining the ruler's dreams, predicting seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine.

what a performance he gives! His "Joseph" is a multimedia spectacle that doesn't forget or forsake its roots, a masterful combination of simple storytelling and razzle-dazzle that could turn younger heads away from MTV and back to OTV - Old Testament Version.

"It's all there in Chapter 39 of Genesis," we're told, this story of Joseph, the 12th and most-favored son of Jacob. His brothers lament that "Being also-rans doesn't make us Joseph fans... the dreamer has to go." Sold into slavery and imprisoned in Egypt, Joseph wins Pharaoh's favor by explaining the ruler's dreams, predicting seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. In 1980s hippie terms, we're advised that "A man who can interpret could go far, could become a star."

As the Narrator, Jeanne DeLong lights up the Royal Oak stage brighter than the multi-colored coat

given to Joseph by Jacob. Her Broadway-level performance is flawless, irresistible and genuine; there's nary a note that seems the result of months of repetition. She wisely plays her role as an observer, allowing her to react to as well as steer the story line.

In the title role, 18-year-old Bradley Ellison has a voice far beyond his years, a mellow baritone that soars for Joseph's imprisoned plea ("Close Every Door") and gives cautious optimism to his final admonition: "The world and I, we are still waiting, still hesitating. Any Dream Will Do."

The show stops for Pharaoh. Composer Webber and lyricist Tim Rice were both huge Elvis fans and designed their potentate as a leather-clad, quiver-hipped anachronism. Karl Miller took a demotion to play this part (the last was God in "Children of Eden") and, for a few minutes, turns the Baldwin into a rock venue of biblical proportions.

Over 15 years, Webber and Rice developed three specialty numbers for the brothers, with country and western, calypso and Jacques Brel motifs. Choreographer Jerry Haines doesn't go overboard in their staging, giving it personality rather than precision. Musical director Martin Mandelbaum infuses great energy into the non-stop score and the cast of 48, including an enthusiastic children's chorus.