

CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

Sensational art, or merely causing a sensation?

If the much-publicized exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art has proven anything, it's that art is the most powerful form of communication.

Talking about the "quality" of communication is another matter. The exhibit's lighting rod, Chris Offili's "Holy Virgin Mary," has received far too much attention. The vague figurative image of the mother of Jesus isn't particularly compelling, nor well executed. The idea of attaching elephant dung to the image to symbolize fertility and honor the artist's African heritage is a bit sophomoric, and not very interesting.

What is more remarkable, however, is that the exhibit has caused such a sensation, which, by the way, is also the name and intent of the show. Many of today's artists are inspired by the "art of creating a spectacle." But look around. Spectacles are hardly confined to the art world.

Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura's recent comments about religion being the "weak-minded" are far more harmful and inflammatory. (Can a public official fairly represent the interests of those citizens he disrespects?)

Yet Offili's work has gotten more media attention than Ventura's ridiculous opinion. It hasn't helped that the mayor of New York City, who happens to be a candidate for the U.S. Senate, has found a push-button issue to serve his political interests.

Since the early cave paintings, artists have held up a mirror to the world. The images have been inspiringly beautiful, and chillingly grotesque. The finest artists have portrayed the paradoxes of the human condition — the good, bad and ugly.

Contemporary art, if anything, has proven to be more than an image. It can be a lightning rod to provoke discussion about a range of topics, including religion, war, homosexuality and gender.

And it can also explore the limits of self-expression in a democracy. Anyone who appreciates modernism realizes that art in the 20th century is distinguished by a search for new mediums and new forms of expression.

The fact that some people, upon hearing about the content of the Brooklyn Museum exhibit, have been shaken from the routine of their lives and have been forced to discuss the meaning of art might be an encouraging sign of the power of art. Unfortunately, being awakened from slumber shouldn't always cause such a sensation.

Role of art museums

Of course, for many, the issue at the heart of the Brooklyn Museum exhibit comes down to whether public funds should go to art museums that show controversial works.

Hardly an easy topic, made even more difficult by the slippery notions about what is art.

Locally, as county commissioners consider the political implications of the proposed tri-county art tax, opponents point to the "Sensation" exhibit as their greatest fear.

What would happen, for instance, if the DIA, Cranbrook Art Museum or the Museum of African-American History chose to exhibit "Sensation?"

Would there be an outcry to cut off public funding? Bet on it. Should funding be based on a curator's selection of exhibits? No way.

Ultimately, it comes down to accepting the essential roles of museums as a repository of artifacts and a reflection of contemporary culture. What is the meaning and function of culture? Go to a museum and see for yourself. Basically, without public funding, museums would have a much narrower range of exhibits. Public funding is essential for museums to continue exhibiting a range of art, including traditional and controversial work. What else would you expect in a pluralistic society?

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Community spirit blooms in 'Our Town'



Figurative art: Harold Van Dine has three oil paintings, including "Speakers Corner #1," in the Our Town exhibit.

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN • STAFF WRITER
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Organizers of the Our Town exhibition may have dropped the original theme that gave it its name but community is still an essential element of the exhibition begun as a fund-raiser for The Community House in Birmingham 14 years ago.

Community spirit intact, Our Town continues to flourish with new events that involve more residents of the area.

In addition to the Gala Preview Evening Wednesday, Oct. 13, where guests will have the first opportunity to purchase art works along with receiving a gift list featuring the work of Birmingham artist Julia Dawson, executive women can network on Thursday evening over hors d'oeuvres. Singles can mingle at a dance on Friday evening. Organized by the Metropolitan Singles Coalition, the dance will raise money for Children's Hospital of Michigan.

"I like the partnership with Children's Hospital," said Sally Gerak, show co-chair along with Sue Donnelly. "I hope it will bring in hundreds of visitors to downtown Birmingham, The Community House and the Our Town exhibit."

Our Town has come a long way since the first exhibition took over the walls of The Community House. According to many local artists, Our Town is one of the most prestigious, if not the most prestigious, of fine arts exhibitions, awarding more than \$10,000 in prizes to Michigan artists. This year more than 240 works of art will be on display Oct. 14-17. Cranbrook Academy of Art director Gerhard Knodel juried the show down from hundreds of entries submitted by 355 artists.

"It's always been an all-Michigan show," said Gerak. "The name of the show, the concept for the show was it would consist of paintings or photographs, two-dimensional works focusing on a specific geographic place. The name Our Town was selected on this geographic concept of a place-specific image and inspired by the Thornton Wilder play based on the universal theme that our town could be any town."

Gerak, who came on board as chairwoman of Our Town in 1995, dropped the theme to allow all artists the opportunity to enter.

"We thought the time had come to broaden the scope, to welcome other media, to make it an all-media, all-Michigan show," said Gerak who also serves on The Community House board. "The show is a way for The Community House to be of service to artists, to provide a place for artists to display their work and to have an audience. A lot of people are intimidated to walk into a gallery. The Community House is not a gallery. It's a Williamsburg Colonial building that they can walk in and feel comfortable."

Michael McCullough is one of the artists who benefited from the unrestricted theme instituted four years ago. His woodcut prints, "The Prophecy" and "Tribal Wedding," provoke thought and sometimes extreme emotion while telling stories of other cultures.

McCullough, who will do about 20 shows this year, first heard about Our Town from other artists. "I was quite shocked to be accepted," said McCullough, a Farmington Hills artist who grew up in Redford. "All the artists were talking about it and many had tried and been turned down."

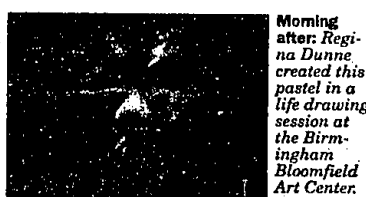
Harold Van Dine's work wasn't accepted last year but he kept on trying. The Birmingham resident has three oil paintings in the Our Town exhibit. Van Dine, who retired three years ago as an architect from Harley Ellington Design in Southfield, studied painting in Mexico.

"Even though I wasn't accepted last year, I decided to give it another shot," said Van Dine who had his first one-man show in Mexico last winter. "Our Town is a show that other artists aspire to be in."

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Surreal: Darcy Scott, a West Bloomfield artist, titled this watercolor "The Procession."



Morning after: Regina Dunne created this pastel in a life drawing session at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center.

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BBSO marks 25 years of 'continuing the journey' theme

For the last two-and-a-half decades, Karla Lamphere, executive director of the Birmingham Bloomfield Symphony Orchestra, has learned that sustaining a community orchestra is an endless journey of connect-the-dots.

It's also known as an ongoing effort to build an audience and search for funding.

From year-to-year and concert-to-concert, Lamphere and the BBSO have assembled a collection of the finest classical musicians outside of the internationally renowned Detroit Symphony.

Under the musical direction of Felix Resnick, the BBSO has attracted a loyal following and a growing list of corporate and individual sponsors for its seasons.

This coming Sunday, the BBSO will open its 25th year in the spirit which it began. The first concert, entitled "A Mediterranean Cruise," is a metaphor that represents the task of taking listeners to new melodic places, said Lamphere of Birmingham.

"We started out on a journey to reach out to the community, and offer a good, affordable experience of classical and pops music," she said.

"We consider ourselves as a community asset just like a library or a theater. Our main job is to get people excited about music."

The BBSO's two-decades of longevity and the overwhelming response to their last concert in August at The Community House clearly demonstrate that the BBSO is indeed getting local residents excited about their homegrown orchestras.

The late summer concert featured the Johnny Trudell Band, and Motown singer Martha Reeves. Literally, according to Lamphere, there were people standing in the street outside of the Community House listening to Reeves perform with the BBSO.

Twenty-five years ago, BBSO began as the West Bloomfield Symphony. A few years later, they changed to the BBSO and moved their performances to Seaholm High School.

Then in 1990, the nomadic symphony took up residence at Temple Beth El. Along the way, the BBSO has become the most awarded community symphony in metro Detroit, gaining recognition at the annual Detroit Music Awards.

Only the community orchestras in Plymouth, Dearborn and Grosse Pointe have been around as long as the BBSO.

The perception is that most community orchestras have part-time musicians who take their instruments out of the closet," said Lamphere, who noted that each player in the BBSO has been selected based on an audi-

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IN CONCERT

Legendary quartet deepens its sound

Evolving and adapting to new members during the last 30 years, the Tokyo String Quartet has managed to maintain its reputation as the preeminent chamber ensemble in the world.

The quartet will bring their historic Stradivarius instruments to Orchestra Hall on Sunday, Oct. 10 for a concert that features the music of Beethoven, Ravel and Shostakovich.

The concert is presented by the Chamber Music Society of Detroit, based in Farmington Hills.

The legendary violins, viola and cello played by the Tokyo String Quartet were named for one of the all-time greatest violinists, Niccolò Paganini, who played each of the instruments more than a century ago. The musicians have been loaned the instruments from the Nippon Music Foundation.

While the quartet has played every major venue on the classical music circuit and has received critical acclaim for their prolific recordings, they've also made in-roads in broadening the public conscience about AIDS. Five years ago, the quartet established Classical Action: Performing

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String music: The Tokyo String Quartet features a new line-up, but a familiar sound.

DSO uncovers the riddle of singin' swing

It's more than a coincidence that Nelson Riddle was a trombonist before he became one of the most acclaimed and sought-after arrangers of his time. The ebb and flow of his arrangements resemble the pulsating pull and push of the human breath.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, Riddle's musical arrangements shaped the swinging background sound that swirled around Frank Sinatra's unique vocal phrasing. Riddle also created the musical backdrop for legendary singers of the day, including Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole and Judy Garland.

This coming weekend, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's Pops conductor Erich Kunzel will present a long list of Riddle's arrangements.

Among the songs are compositions by Berlin, Carmichael and Sullivan, and a few classics from Cole Porter.

Joining the DSO and Kunzel will be vocalist Michael Gough

and swing dancers.

After touring with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra in the 1940s, Riddle became the top arranger for NBC radio. At the time, being on radio was the equivalent of being seen on MTV and VH-1.

In the early 1950s, Riddle's work on Nat King Cole's "Mona Lisa" made him a much sought-after arranger.

By the mid decade, he was working with Sinatra on what is considered the definitive works of each artist. The albums included "Songs for Young Lovers" and "Songs for Swingin' Lovers," which was Sinatra's all-time best-seller.

Until his retirement in the early 1980s, Riddle's arrangements could be heard on television shows and films, including the score for the 1974 film, "The Great Gatsby." His last recording was for Linda Ronstadt's 1983 album, "What's New."

— Frank Provenzano, Staff Writer

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