

CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

Creating art that transcends skin color

With his neatly combed hair and groomed gray beard, C. Bruce Unwin appears much like a relaxed artist who has retrieved to the sylvan landscape of the Leelanau Peninsula.

After years as a graphic artist and art director for some of the area's largest advertising agencies, Unwin had enough of the collaborative approach to commercial art.

Upon retirement in the early 1980s, he headed north. Just outside the rolling fields of Lake Leelanau, he set up his easel in the "add on" studio to his home.

Amid the pastoral setting, he painted landscapes that exuded solitude and serenity.

But in Unwin's memory bank, there were haunting images that he couldn't forget. Situations without resolution.

Unwin turned inward. A former Birmingham resident, Unwin arrived in town last week to install his most recent exhibit, "Black



STAFF PHOTO BY JIM JACOBSON

Cool jazz: Painter Bruce Unwin's exhibit "Black Echoes" resounds with universal appeal.

Echoes" at Moore's Gallery in downtown Birmingham.

"Black Echoes" is his attempt to bring some perspective and wisdom to the inhumanity he witnessed more than 50 years ago.

Questions of our times

Unwin's 21 paintings are divided into three distinct areas: jazz, minstrelsy and slavery.

Naturally, Unwin is concerned that he might be perceived as someone who has a passing fancy in African American history.

Or worse, as someone who perpetuates racial stereotypes. (His minstrelsy paintings depict African Americans with "Amos 'n Andy" simplicity.)

Of course, he is neither. "I'm terrified at being misunderstood," he said. "There's a feeling of being an intruder."

"Frankly, this (exhibit) is a white man's statement, a positive point-of-view of African-American culture."

But regardless of the melodic touches he demonstrates in paintings of B.B. King or Wynton Marsalis, or the poignant portrayals of slavery, there's no escaping the obvious.

Unwin is white. The experiences he seeks to dramatize through painting is inherently a part of African-American experience.

It's easy to dismiss the work as superficial. And, yes, even to refer to the artist as an "intruder."

But the problem with that type of thinking is that it, too, is superficial. And ultimately, unfair.

Unwin isn't some provocateur, or intruder. What he witnessed and experienced as a prisoner of war in German concentration camps gives him license to probe for answers to "Why people exploit others?" and "What can be done to stop man's inhumanity to man?"

Indeed, there are questions that transcend race. And with the ongoing slaughter in Bosnia and continual

PLEASE SEE COLOR, C2

Splendid Sounds OF HEROISM

LOCAL COMPOSER

INSPIRED BY
LEGENDARY
TUSKEGEE
AIRMEN

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

Not far from where Brian Belanger has spent the better part of the last eight months composing his joyous "Salute to the Tuskegee Airmen" is the definitive statement about the stark contrasts in the life of a 1990s composer.

While talking about his intricate four-piece composition inspired by the heroic feats of a group of World War II African-American pilots, Belanger stops suddenly to listen to wails coming from upstairs in his Royal Oak home.

Apparently, his 2-month-old daughter also has a point to make. As if counting the beats of a whole note, Belanger ponders if she's awoken from her afternoon nap, or if it's just a case of "gna."

So much for the ethereal air of the composing life.

With one hand on a musical score and the other reaching for the proverbial baby bottle, Belanger's daylong balancing act offers a variation on the notion of improvisation.

It helps, of course, that Belanger is never far from his music.

"The orchestration is inside my head," he said.

And spread around the house.

In a cramped office an arm's length from the dining room table — and a few feet from a stroller and a rocking horse — Belanger manages a full-time career as a video producer with his emerging talent as a musical composer.

With a grant from the Michigan Council for the Arts and Cultural Affairs and the blessing of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historical Museum, Belanger's newest composition will highlight the Sunday, Oct. 18, kick-off concert of the Birmingham-Bloomfield Symphony Orchestra's 1998-99 season.

The piece, filled with the bold swells of romanticism and the rudimentary beats of militarism, will be also performed Tuesday, Oct. 20, at the Charles H. Wright Museum

Please see HEROISM, C2



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZILINSKY

Balancing act: Composer Brian Belanger composed an homage to the Tuskegee Airmen in his home office, often taking breaks with his wife to take care of his two children.

BIRMINGHAM-BLOOMFIELD SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA 1998-99 SEASON

All concerts at Temple Bath Et, 14 Mile Road at Telegraph, Bloomfield Hills (except where noted).

- **CLASSICAL CONCERT** - 7:30 p.m., Sunday Oct. 18, Featuring "Tuskegee Airmen Suite" by Brian Belanger; and pieces by Barber, Adams, Schuman and Copland.
- "Tuskegee Airmen Suite" at Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Detroit, 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 20
- "Great Music from the Silver Screen and TV, Sunday, Nov. 15. Featuring music from "North by Northwest," "Jurassic Park," "Star Trek," along with "Huckleberry Finn" Overture, and Rodgers' "Victory at Sea."

OTHER CONCERTS

- "Jazz Up Your Holidays," 7:30 p.m., Sunday, Dec. 27.
- Annual Valentine's Benefit Concert, 7:30 p.m., Sunday, Feb. 14.
- "Westward, Ho!" pops concert, 7:30 p.m., Sunday, April 18
- "Symphonic Giants," featuring pianists Joann Freeman & Jutta Czapski, Sunday, May 16.

SEASON TICKETS - \$84 (adult), \$50 (student); three-concert season - \$50 (adult), \$35 (student); price per concert - \$20. For information, (248) 649-2276.



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZILINSKY

Calming effect: Janet Torno, BBAC executive director, stands in front of Sol LeWitt's curvilinear wall design.

LeWitt's wall painting makes abstract art accessible

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

In abstract and conceptual art, there's an inherent anxiety passed from artist to art viewer. Typically, viewers wonder if they'll "get it," and if they don't, whether that means that they'll be relegated to the dunce-cap stigma of the "culturally illiterate."

Rest assured. As far as concepts go, here's one that's not so heavy.

Indeed, the latest wall drawing by New York conceptual artist Sol LeWitt won't cause anxiety fits for viewers. Rather, meditating on LeWitt's curvilinear design should come with a warning: excessive reflection will cause peaceful feelings.

LeWitt's recently painted bi-colored oscillations appear along the walls of the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center's Robinson Gallery through December.

"His wall drawings have a restful feeling of order without being monotonous," said Janet Torno, executive director at the BBAC.

While resisting the label of conceptual artist, LeWitt has nonetheless built a reputation for challenging how art is conceptualized, created and viewed.

"Accessibility" isn't usually associated with abstract and conceptual art, but with LeWitt's growing appeal, that idea is changing.

With a new exhibit at the prestigious PaceWildenstein Gallery in New York, and retrospective of his work planned to open within the next 18 months at the San Francisco Art Museum, Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art and the Whitney Museum, LeWitt has become one of the most sought-after contemporary American artists.

Yet just because the reclusive LeWitt is in high demand doesn't mean that he's unapproachable.

Now is his work exorbitantly expensive. LeWitt charged the BBAC his nonprofit rate — solely the cost of materials and travel-related expenses for an assistant (estimated at \$7,000).

Throughout the preparation for the wall painting at the BBAC, LeWitt

WHAT: Wall Painting by Sol LeWitt
WHEN: Through Wednesday, Dec. 23
WHERE: Robinson Gallery at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, 1516 S. Grand Blvd., Birmingham, (248) 644-0866

Please see LEWITT, C2

POETRY

Performance poetry crosses a new border

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

If there's a distinctive post-modern art form, it may be performance poetry. (Sorry, karaoke doesn't make it.) Eclectic, artistically disheveled and blurring boundaries between music and verse, performance poetry can't be accused of belonging to any tradition.

And that's both its appeal and perhaps the reason that a broader audience hasn't been hooked into "poetry you can sing" as M.L. Liebler, one of the most often-heard performance poets, has described it.

There's hope, however, that a sing along to poetry will commence this Friday at Rackham Auditorium on the

University of Michigan campus as five poets and their musical accompanists come together for "Border Crossings: A Festival of New Jazz/Rock & Poetry."

What the Lilith Fair did for recognizing contemporary female singers and songwriters, "Border Crossings" may bring to several of the Midwest's most compelling poets, including Liebler, Richard Tillinghast, Arwulf Arwulf, Brenda Cardenas and Barry Wallenstein.

The lineup of poets offers more than a beatnik chic, and a smoky coffee-house setting. There's a cross-section of personal and political polemics in their words.

"This isn't about entertainment, it's about ritual," said Arwulf, a longtime Ann Arbor poet who also has a jazz program on WEMU-FM (88.3).

Standing in front of an improvising ensemble, Arwulf combines his theater with an undiluted version of what he calls "cosmic letters about the earth along with some politically strident stuff."

Blurring the line: Richard Tillinghast & Poignant Plecostomus perform Friday at "Border Crossings," a performance poetry festival.



WHAT: "Border Crossings: A Festival of New Jazz/Rock & Poetry," featuring poets Arwulf, Liebler, Brenda Cardenas, M.L. Liebler, Richard Tillinghast and Barry Wallenstein

WHEN: 7:30 p.m., Friday, Oct. 9

WHERE: Rackham Auditorium, University of Michigan campus, Ann Arbor

ADMISSION: Free. Donations will be accepted for the Great Lakes Literary Alliance. For information, call (734) 764-6296 or (734) 662-7407

The title of his upcoming CD, "Reproductive Rights for All Women," provides the type of in-your-face statement uttered by Arwulf.

While there's a sense that performance poetry intends to make poetry more accessible by becoming more like a folk, rock, rap or jazz concert, Arwulf doesn't believe the music simplifies the verse.

"It's not New Age crapola," he said.

Please see POETRY, C2