

Glimpses of life behind the blinds

By Marion Hallgaard
special writer

Michael Joseph's nudes stand, sit, kneel or recline in a hallucinatory glow of explosive neon colors. Their flesh tones of hot purples, blues, reds and greens are softened by luminous whites. The nervous energy of the brushstrokes is intensified with graffiti-like scribbles and scratches.

These compelling paintings seem to be intimate glimpses into the backrooms of striptease joints, massage parlors and topless-dancing bars where the females gather to apply makeup, posture, relax with a certain languorous eroticism, and frequently engage in a violence that exceeds mere altercation or hair-pulling. In some of the canvases women threaten other women with guns.

Joseph said that five of the large canvases and 10 of the related studies at Xochipilli Gallery of Birmingham were inspired by a small, one-time honky-tonk town called State Line, on the Idaho-Washington border.

About 20 years ago when the legal drinking age was 18 in Idaho and 21 in Washington, State Line was a thriving town clustered with bars and motels that also served as brothels.

JOSEPH'S KEEN and observant eye can be as aggressively acidic as that of a Toulouse-Lautrec. He also has a deliciously macabre sense of humor. Men are absent from the tableaux — apart from one menacing figure painted in a bloody red who (again) points a gun at a woman nonchalantly reclining on a chair.

The artist's technique is to produce shadow images by shining a light on his model. The images are then transferred to the canvas and painted in with aerosol spray, china markers and oil sticks.

He emphasizes a part or parts of the nude torso and leaves the rest

undefined, almost always excluding the facial features. One notable feature in many of the paintings are the horizontal lines, which suggest windows with closed blinds, contrasted with the vertical lines of the chair struts.

In two other works, which are studies for a series called "Katy's Wildlife Sanctuary," the nudes are bathed in a vivid orange hue. This work in progress is based on an encounter of rare serendipity. On driving through central Montana, Joseph and his wife, Daphne, suddenly came across a ramshackle two-story house turned into a bar in the middle of nowhere. "It had the startling name, Katy's Wildlife Sanctuary," he said.

Joseph, who was born in Idaho, received a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Idaho where he entered on a football scholarship.

HE WAS unable to complete the football requirement because of a neck injury which he says would probably have confined him to a wheelchair had he continued to play.

He attended the Cranbrook Academy of Art and earned a master's in printmaking.

Joseph manages to maintain a full-time job with an automobile supply firm in Detroit while running a five-acre ranch with his wife in Ypsilanti. They raise hogs and angora goats. The scarce remaining time is spent making art in his studio.

"It's a long day," he said with believable conviction. He has also taught art at Cranbrook and in Nova Scotia and California.

"Motel Series, State Line and Other Vacation Spots, 1988" runs through Feb. 4 at the Xochipilli Gallery, 568 N. Woodward, Birmingham, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.



WSU's productions

Theater is thriving at Wayne State University in Detroit. (Photo upper left) Marilyn Mays is Marguerite and James Vezina is Sir Percy in the Hilberry Theatre production of "The Scarlet Pimpernel," opening at 8 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 4, following previews Thursday-Friday, Feb. 2-3.

(Photo above) Steve Brady is Platonov and Marilyn Mays, again, is cast as Anna Petrovna in Michael Frayn's award-winning comedy "Wild Honey," in repertory at the Hilberry.

(Photo lower left) Jeff Chastang is Yasim and Angela Spencer is Ma Brodie in the world premiere of Brenda A. Flanagan's "When the Jumble Bird Calls," opening at 8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 27, at the Bonstelle Theatre.

For more information on these productions call the WSU Theatre box office at 577-2950.

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