

CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

A mother awaits the sound of brotherly conversation

Occasionally, there are stories that make you snap to attention. Stories that grab you by the throat, wring your heart and make you ask, "Why?" This is one of them. But don't think for a moment that Linda Brown, her husband or their two kids want your sympathy. They're just looking for your understanding. This is a time to set aside preconceptions. Just know that if you're in a battle, you want Brown of Clarkston at your side. Educated as an attorney and trained as an advocate, she began her legal career representing management in labor disputes. Today, she works part time helping people with disabilities with their legal problems. But her greatest trial is the one she awakes to each day. Everyone has a challenge. On September mornings when many parents are rushing their kids off to school, Brown needs a little extra time before sending off her two sons, ages 8 and 10.

What: Art exhibit, featuring work by students with autism, sponsored by the Autism Society of America, Oakland County Chapter. Exhibit held in conjunction with charity golf outing. When: 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 15. Where: Bay Pointe Golf Club, 4001 Heggerly Road, West Bloomfield; (248) 360-0600. For information about the Autism Society of America, Oakland County Chapter, call (248) 766-0480, or write to: 6320 Wimbly Lane, West Bloomfield, 48323. Some may consider the autistic behaviors of each of her sons as obstacles. Brown prefers to think of it as a challenge. "They're the bravest children I've ever met," she said with maternal pride. Two special sons. Two unique individuals. And two distinct cases of autism, a condition with a spectrum of disorders that defies easy generalizations. This Tuesday at the Bay Pointe Golf Club in West Bloomfield, the art work of students with autism will be displayed. Based on the expressive range of work, the art reflects the emotional depth of people with autism. Art provides a refuge for those with discipline and technical proficiency and for those who seek to steady their impulsiveness. With precise language and the ability to grasp the obstacles of her own lives, Brown articulates the frustration and inevitable patience required to help her children. Within a year of her oldest son being diagnosed as autistic, Brown was a board member of a local Autism of America organization. In the last 10 years, she has worked for more sensitive testing for autism. And has fought against reactionary stereotypes of autistic children. Any parent who has cringed as they watched their child fall, or cry because of being a target of mean-spirited words knows that watching a child's pain is like a spear through your lungs. How does Brown stay strong as she takes her sons to speech therapists and vigilantly watches over them for fear that they might run off? "Sometimes I'm not," she said. Wisdom is a bitter irony.

Common language The irony gets even more bitter. Brown's oldest son, Ross, communicates by pointing to letters on board. Although he doesn't speak, he's quite aware of what's going on. Last year, Ross, a 6th-grader at Clarkston Elementary, made the principal's list for his good grades. When he wants to communicate, he puts his hand in his mother's hand and together they point to letters on a board to discover the words and sentences that give his world a language.

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PROVOCATIVE EXHIBIT STIRS ISSUES OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

BY FRANK PROVENZANO  
STAFF WRITER

Just when the dilemmas of politically correct language seemed to be resolved comes the ultimate post-modern gender twister in Cranbrook Art Museum's season-opening exhibit, "It's all about ME, Not You," an installation by the late Greer Lankton.

Within one of Cranbrook's interior galleries is a rectangular, white-sliding house. Inside is a cathartic look at the artist's life, including photographs, pen and ink drawings, images of heroes and heroines, and psychologically tortured dolls, some of which resemble the artist.

But in reality, there are only approximations of the artist. In mind, body and art, Lankton is the personification of a pushing-it-to-the-edge artist - morally ambivalent, outrageously androgynous and excessively individualistic.

Through Lankton's imagery of gender exploration, viewers will inevitably become curious about what was the day-to-day life of the artist, a transsexual, who, at age 38, died in late 1996 from the apparent effects of drugs and anorexia.

Indeed, there's no separating Lankton's art from her tortured life as a "woman in a man's body," then a transsexual and an artist seeking a 3D world to recreate the haunting images ruminating in her mind, and sculpted into the deep pores of her skin.

A reading room adjacent to the exhibit provides biographical information on Lankton as well as a range of books on gender studies.

"This exhibit isn't really about 'me,'" said Irene Hofmann, assistant curator at Cranbrook Museum of Art. "You feel the soul of the artist. Perhaps people will feel more compassion and understanding."

The small installation house of Lankton's art is placed on an ersatz set: two patio furniture rests on an astroturf lawn. A pair of legs wearing red ruby shoes are stuffed under the house.

Apparently, the house landed in a bizarre world not far from Oz, but there's none of the joy of watching Dorothy finding her way home.

"It's all about ME, Not You" is utterly gut-wrenching. Not because of its stark confrontation of transsexuality, but because of its relentless psychological and physical exposures of the artist.

While some may find Lankton's work painfully beautiful, it is quite difficult to look beyond the pain and vulnerability.

Exposing the private life

Upon reading and seeing the graphic details of Lankton's sexual transformation in art, and accompanying photo album, there's an uneasy, but all-too-familiar exposure to the private side of life.

In the name of art and with the hope-to-shock sensibility of a racy tabloid, Lankton's 16-



SEARCHING FOR THE TRUE SELF



Narcissistic or self-revelation: Greer Lankton's installation presents haunting images of an artist's search for sexual liberation.

New Exhibits at Cranbrook Art Museum, 1221 N. Woodward, Bloomfield Hills, (248) 645-3300  
■ "It's all about ME, Not You," an installation by Greer Lankton, through Nov. 1. Opening reception 7 p.m. Friday, Sept. 18.  
■ "The Squeeze Chair Project" by Wendy Jacob, through Sunday, Nov. 1.  
■ "Somewhere," an installation by Carla Preiss, through Sunday, Jan. 3.  
■ "Movie Movies 24 Hours," a project by Robert Andersen, through Sunday, Nov. 1.

minute of fame has the effect of a cattle prod forcing viewers to face their own issues of gender and sexual identity.

"We're not doing a job if we're not making people think," said Hofmann. "The exhibit suggests that gender ought not to be so clear cut." To conservatives or those supporters of the Christian Coalition, Hofmann's mere choice of the exhibit might appear as an endorsement of the transsexual lifestyle.

To those possible critics, Hofmann pleads for tolerance and compassion.

"Greer didn't have control of anything in her life, except for her art, especially her dolls."

The dolls had been a life-long infatuation for Lankton. At an early age as a boy, she chose to play with dolls. Soon thereafter, she made her own dolls that apparently symbolized her emotional turmoil.

Her life is filled with stories of ridicule and rejection. But surprisingly, also of acceptance.

Lankton's father is a Presbyterian minister, whose church raised money to pay for the artist's sex-change operation. Several years later, Lankton's father also officiated at the marriage ceremony of his son.

Art of spectacle

In the last few years, Lankton's work drew critical acclaim. Her work appeared in several New York galleries, and the biennial art shows at the Whitney and Venice in 1995.

Shortly after "It's all about ME, Not You" opened two years ago at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, Lankton died.

Hofmann pointed out the tragic irony.

She was just getting the acceptance she longed for. If she would have survived, she would have gone on to much greater things."

Drawing generalizations about a singular artist's work that represents an alternative lifestyle, however, might be a far stretch in a desire to look for broader social relevance.

In essence, Lankton has created an homage to the spectacle of her gender identity. Her statement resonates powerfully with narcissistic appeal: She is the subject and creator of her own art.

Following that logic, it seems that only Lankton could make a qualitative judgment about her work.

In the four decades from being born Greer and dying as Greer, Lankton gave form to a maelstrom of confusion, and anguish of reconciling the identity of a woman with the physicality of a man.

Seen in the best light, "It's all about ME, Not You" invites viewers to walk along Lankton's path past her sexual transformation and onto the realm of liberation.

Ultimately, that path ends in front of a mirror. The bitter challenge, however, is to overcome feelings of vulnerability without becoming consumed by them.

Violinist seeks balance in life, music

BY HUGH GALLAGHER  
STAFF WRITER

Violin virtuoso Joshua Bell began playing violin when he was 6 years old and was playing concert halls by the time he was 14, but he has been widely recognized as one "child prodigy" who has been able to maintain a balanced life.

"It's very important to me," he said. "I can't imagine life being just music. I have lots of other interests."

He even takes days off when he doesn't practice.

Bell plays his music with a passion and precision that he also brings to tennis and golf.

"I played golf twice this weekend. It's getting better. In another lifetime I could see myself playing a lot of golf."

In this lifetime, Bell will open the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's 1998-99 season with a performance of Mendelssohn's Concerto for Violin. The orchestra, under music director Neeme Jarvi, will also perform Buck's "Festival Overture" and Mahler's dramatic Symphony No. 6.

Bell's boyish good-looks do not mask the musical artistry he's been honing since childhood. Bell was born and reared in Bloomington, Ind., home of Indiana University, noted as one of the country's best music schools. When he was 12 he began to study with Joseph Gingold, a former concertmaster of the Cleveland Orchestra and noted teacher.

"I was lucky to be born in Bloomington, my mother was born in Detroit and went to Wayne State, actually. But they moved to Bloomington because my father taught in the psychology department," he said.

At 14 Bell won the Seventeen Magazine/General Motors Competition and made his orchestral debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra. He has since performed with many of the world's leading orchestras and has recorded widely, first for London/Decca and

What: Detroit Symphony Orchestra opens new season with featured violinist Joshua Bell. Buck's Festival Overture. Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. Mahler's Symphony No. 6. When: 8 p.m. Thursday-Friday, Sept. 17-18, 8:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 19 and 3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 20.

Where: Detroit Orchestra Hall. Tickets: \$17 to \$48 (Box seats: \$55 and \$63). At the Orchestra Hall Box Office or by calling (313) 576-5111.

Please see VIOLINIST, C2

ARTS FESTIVAL

Arts come alive at spectacular Detroit festival

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN  
STAFF WRITER

Pedestrian sign symbols come to life, a flock of stilted performers dressed as ostriches and a recreation of the blues music heard on Hastings Street in the

1940s - the 12th annual Detroit Festival of the Arts outshines itself this year with a spectacular celebration of visual art, music, dance and culture Friday-Sunday, Sept. 18-20.

Co-produced by the University Cultural Center Association and Wayne State University, the festival features more than 500 visual and performing artists, including photographers William Thayer of Redford and Barbara Abel, West Bloomfield (see chart for list of local participating artists), a children's fair, literary arts festival, international foods, arts processions and a 50-ton sand sculpture of stampeding safari animals. And it's all free thanks to the Chrysler Corp. Fund and other sponsors. The University Cultural Center Association worked all year to raise the \$700,000 necessary to bring in interactive art activities such as Truck Art where visitors can help paint a mural on three 48-foot semi trucks located at Woodward and Farnsworth.

Peter Cummings, a Bloomfield Hills resident and vice chairman of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, co-chairs the festival with John E. Lobbia, chairman and chief executive director of Detroit Edison.

"What sets the Detroit Festival apart is the diversity," said Cummings. "It's an absolute kaleidoscope mix of events - performing artists from Cuba, Africa, Asia and the Americas, visual arts and offbeat kinds of things I've never seen before like The Klezmatics and a Czechoslovakian blues band. But what makes it special is it's surrounded by the great cultural institutions of the state. You can have an arts fair in a field or a parking lot, but to have it against the DIA and to have ongoing exhibitions like 'Angels from the Vatican' at the DIA and 'Black Bottom and Paradise Valley' at the Museum of African American History, if you put it all together it's going to evolve into one of the great festivals in the country."

Arthur L. Johnson founded the festival with the concept it would be "second to none." The retired vice president of Wayne State University Relations remembers the first festival 12 years ago, and the emotional experience of looking at the 16 blocks of festivities he'd created in the University Cultural Center.

Festival facts  
What: A celebration of the arts featuring more than 500 visual and performing artists, including stage and street performers, international foods, a children's fair, literary arts festival, arts procession, and youth artists market. Free.  
When: 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Friday-Sunday, Sept. 18-20. Children's fair 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday, and noon to 6 p.m. Sunday.  
Where: University Cultural Center, bounded by Warren and Ferry, Brush and Anthony Wayne Drive, Detroit. For information, call (313) 577-5088.

Local participating artists are David Trevillian (mixed media) and Anthony Thomas (drawing). Redford: William Thayer (photography). Redford: Carlos Barahona (clay). Bloomfield Hills: Kathy Phillips (watercolor) and Barbara Abel (photography). West Bloomfield: Michael McCullough (printmaking). Farmington Hills: Alice Ham (clay). Borkley: Penny Mason (fiber). Clarkston, and Martha Miller (watercolor). Commerce.

man and chief executive director of Detroit Edison. "What sets the Detroit Festival apart is the diversity," said Cummings. "It's an absolute kaleidoscope mix of events - performing artists from Cuba, Africa, Asia and the Americas, visual arts and offbeat kinds of things I've never seen before like The Klezmatics and a Czechoslovakian blues band. But what makes it special is it's surrounded by the great cultural institutions of the state. You can have an arts fair in a field or a parking lot, but to have it against the DIA and to have ongoing exhibitions like 'Angels from the Vatican' at the DIA and 'Black Bottom and Paradise Valley' at the Museum of African American History, if you put it all together it's going to evolve into one of the great festivals in the country."

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Family fun: Toronto artist Susan Todd designed this year's Detroit Festival of the Arts poster.