

CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

Too busy to think about violence? Meet a survivor

FACT: Firearm deaths for children are nearly 12 times higher in the U.S. than in 26 other major industrialized countries combined.

Michigan Citizens for Handgun Control

Heidi Van Arnem of Birmingham concedes that these days there are many issues that take up politicians' time. She'll admit that people, in general, are too busy to stop and listen.

She is polite, with a ready smile. And naturally tactful.

She doesn't have to be. No one would blame her if she's as angry today as she was 17 years ago when a bullet

from a rifle ripped through her spinal chord. The gun was in the hands of the brother of her friend, a 13-year-old with an unrestrained curiosity and his own gun collection.

Who could blame Van Arnem if she talked about gutless politicians, reactionary supporters of the NRA who cry about a mandatory waiting period and how we've all grown complacent about violence? Her tone is soft and knowing. Wisdom is a painful reminder of the circumstance that transformed her from an independent 16-year-old who just learned to drive to a quadriplegic who must rely on a staff of aides to transport her.

"It's a misconception to think that a gun is there to protect you. Guns serve to maim and kill."

Perhaps it's time — once again — to confront misconceptions.

I-CAN, I will
On Sunday, Nov. 21, Van Arnem will serve as honorary chair of a benefit for Michigan Citizens for Hand-

gun Control. The Birmingham-based non-profit organization will use the funds to support political candidates who support gun control legislation.

The citizens group is the underfunded opposition to the NRA and others who believe the right to bear arms comes without restrictions.

Or, some may argue, without responsibility.

While she speaks out often about the need for gun control, Van Arnem, 33, has gotten on with her life.

She is the founder of Birmingham-based I-CAN, an on-line community for people with disabilities.

The service will offer information about health, benefits and legislative issues as well as services such as making travel arrangements.

Van Arnem, who also serves on Gov. John Engler's commission on disability concerns, has a schedule that is hectic and ambitious, by any standard.

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ARTFUL REVELANCE

Three Birmingham galleries demonstrate the variety of contemporary painting

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
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Ray Fleming can't be accused of being shy. He's prone to speak his mind garbled with his gentlemanly down-home Louisiana manner. Seldom is he ambiguous. And on occasion, he may even sound like an art-world parish.

"The joke about minimal art is that it always has to be (exhibited) larger-than-life," said Fleming, all-too-ready to debate what he might consider as anything less than a well-constructed composition.

Ironically, the accomplished watercolor painter, art collector and director of the Kidd Gallery in Birmingham has turned his attention to abstractionism, a style of expression of shape, line, form and color that lends itself to myriad interpretations. And usually assertions about the relevance and accessibility of art.

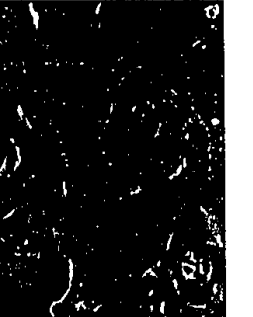
"Abstraction: New Directions for a New Millennium" offers many variations on the theme, from works by legendary abstract artists such as Hans Hofmann and Helen Frankenthaler to the inventive object sculpture of John Townsend to the subtle compositions of up-and-coming artist Calo Fonseca to the West Coast, new age organic forms of Jeremy Kidd (no relation to the gallery owner).

"The best paintings have a sense of mystery," he said. "The magic happens when the extremes of realism and pure abstraction start to merge." Then, as if to make a case for his point of view, Fleming gestured to the paintings on the two floors at the gallery.

Like any expansive exhibit, there



Varied strokes: (clockwise from top left) The works of Victor Rodriguez, Robert Gniwewk, Herbert Gentry and Ronnie Landfield provide examples of photo-realism, abstractionism and figurative-expressionistic painting.



are pieces that are easily looked past, and suffer the disease of abstractionism — a cool, calculated disinterestedness that looks more like flacid design than art.

But on a whole, "Abstraction" is the type of exhibit that aims beyond collector's taste, and provides a modestly convincing case about why Fleming believes there's a renewed interest in abstract painting.

"People are realizing that 'tabloid art' doesn't have any lasting power," he said.

"We're going back to the time when artists are expected to put a lot of thought into their work, not just come up with something that's shocking."

Stroll along Townsend

A stroll along Townsend in downtown Birmingham reveals three distinctive exhibits at two nearby galleries that complement the Kidd's "Abstraction" exhibit.

Collectively, the exhibits at the Kidd, David Klein and G.R. N'Namdi galleries reveal the diversity of contemporary painting.

For obvious reasons, "Detroit Theaters Past and Present: Recent Paintings by Robert Gniwewk" at the Klein Gallery has received wide attention since the show opened last weekend. In a series of realistic renderings of Detroit the-

aters, Gniwewk has created a historical pictorial of the city's cinematic past. Among the theaters painted are the Berkeley, Redford, Hilland, Crystal, Colonial, United Artists and Detroit's only surviving drive-in, the Ford-Wyoming.

While the paintings have a drippy nostalgia, there is a strong sense of time and place. And Gniwewk is a diligent painter of details and fine lines that infuse the paintings with an intimate touch that can't be found in photos of the same subject-matter.

In the shimmering light of dusk in several of his paintings, Gniwewk evokes the haunting forlornness of Edward Hopper's famous urban landscapes. Perhaps that's an obvious comparison, but surely an endorsement of the depth of Gniwewk's realism.

While Victor Rodriguez's work, displayed in the front gallery at Klein, shares the same photorealism sensibility as Gniwewk, it reaches for more symbolism and sensuality. His muse, his wife, Mayte, is certainly as shapely as any physical structure of brick and mortar.

In a series of paintings of Mayte, Rodriguez expands the possibilities of photorealism. The style isn't just an accurate perspective of reality, but a visually laden, post-modern short story.

Using an airbrush, Rodriguez liberates his

subject from the predictability of a portrait. She is self-aware in her nakedness, and slinking in and out of the pop cultural landscape with her gaudy sunglasses.

Distilled forms

Despite the quiet inside the N'Namdi Gallery, the energy of Herbert Gentry's paintings exude a swirling lyricism.

Gentry is among the most influential African American artists of the century. And he was part of the Paris scene of the 1950s that included fellow painter Ed Clark, Romare Bearden and writers Richard Wright and James Baldwin.

In a metro area recognized as having one of the largest number of collectors of African American art, the N'Namdi Gallery is at the forefront of exhibiting an impressive list of legendary artists.

Included in the exhibit of Gentry's work is his famous painting, "The Claw," one of the seminal figurative expressionistic works.

Gentry's evolution since the late 1950s has steadily explored and distilled relationships among human forms. His paintings are distinguished by basic figurative forms.

Yet his work is hardly devoid of emotion. His use of deep reds, vibrant blues and startling yellows provide the equivalent of optical jazz.

"The issue in his paintings is the beauty of the spirit," said George N'Namdi, who'll move the exhibit to his Chicago gallery after mid-January.

"There's a sense of mystery, yet a strong feeling for friendship and family."

Please see GALLERIES, C5

THEATER

Lively 'Flanagan's Wake' provides hearty laughs to resurrect the dead

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
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The crowd filed in dutifully at the makeshift parlor at Bac's Theatre in Pontiac where a wake was being held for a friendly fellow named Flanagan.

First stop: the bar to fill up with appetites, limericks and fabricated tales about the recently departed. There's plenty of raucous encouragement

for audience members to get two drinks — one for each kidney. Each waker, as the roaming cast of "Flanagan's Wake" reminds, is an ritualistic exercise of drinking, dancing, and between bouts of storytelling and eulogies, a fair amount of fighting.

Somewhere along the way to depositing the wooden casket six feet under, a sermon gets mangled and an Irish culture that celebrates life at the ceremony of death gets honored and insulted.

It's the type of irresistible fun of family reunions, comedy clubs, and well, Irish wakes.

Like its interactive cousin "Tony n' Tina's Wedding" that plays upstairs at Bac's, "Flanagan's Wake" proves that the theatrical experience can indeed transform an

audience of strangers into a community where the common interest is a good laugh and a sing-along.

There isn't any relating the current production of the hilarious interactive play. In about two hours, the charming cast demonstrates the appeal of dissolving the traditional fourth wall of theater and inviting the audience to participate in a 50-percent scripted play and a 50-percent free-for-all.

For Maureen Dorrington of Beverly Hills, who portrays the howling mystic Kathleen Mooney, "Flanagan's Wake" is a play of scripted spontaneity that draws in the audience in the actor's unfolding craft of storytelling.

"Being 'in the moment,'" said Dorrington, "is the key."



Liberated: The cast of "Flanagan's Wake" puts audiences at ease, but not without a good deal of prodding.

Please see FLANAGAN'S, C5