

CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

DIA controversy reveals shocking, edgy reality

Somewhere between the Warholian 15-minutes of fame and sociologist Neil Postman's premonition of a society amusing itself to death fits the absurd controversy at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

But perhaps the controversy is no more absurd than the times in which we live.

The raging controversy between an installation artist crying censorship and a museum defending its right to select the work it exhibits is densely packed with allegations, presumptions, hurt feelings and plenty of misunderstandings.

In the final analysis, it's a controversy that should have been easily avoided. Why wasn't it? Who has been hurt by the subsequent reactionary debate? And what, if anything, can be learned?

Controversy revisited

The ping-pong debate began 10 days ago when DIA Director Graham Beal closed installation artist Jeff Bourgeois's exhibit "Van Gogh's Ear," the first of the artist's 12 one-week exhibits. Bourgeois intended to document and offer a derivative interpretation of "shock art" of the 20th century.

Several pieces in Bourgeois's exhibit were deemed highly inappropriate and potentially offensive to museum visitors. While Bourgeois had been discussing the exhibit for the last two years with the DIA, apparently curator Maryanne Wilkinson was surprised by several elements when they showed up at the museum.

Specifically, the DIA was concerned with Bourgeois's reference to a Brazilian nut using an inflammatory racial slur (the "n word"), a condom placed on a plastic doll called "Bathtub Jesus," a jar of urine (allegedly the same used by Andres Serrano without a submerged crucifix) and a video of a woman taking a shower in which the blood-tinged water simulated menstruation.

In his defense, Bourgeois claims he was prepared to be in the gallery to respond to visitors as they were hit in the face with their own preconceptions and prejudices about race, religion, sex and gender.

Guerilla campaign

While the earnest and soft-spoken Bourgeois has been called a conceptual artist, his work over the years has more of an absurdist tone. Three years ago, he established his own museum, called the Museum of Contemporary Art in Pontiac.

The museum is an 8-by-10 partitioned space inside Galerie Blue. The "museum" has exhibited Bourgeois's pieces and other provocative work.

Bourgeois's canvas is somewhere in the amorphous public mind. For instance, the "museum" is run by a fictitious director after the equally fictitious founder mysteriously drowned. Bourgeois's point: Museums are stodgy repositories and must be prodded to show the works of contemporary artists. From his small closet of a museum Bourgeois is waging a guerrilla campaign to force a rethinking of the role and responsibilities of museums.

Considering Bourgeois's perspective, it's difficult to discern the line.

Please see CONVERSATIONS, C3



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY SOLTNER

Shocking? Through his provocative and edgy work, installation artist Jeff Bourgeois of Rochester continues to challenge the notion of what is art.



DESERVING MEDALIST

Her small-scale sculptures are on display throughout the world

BY CORINNE ABATT • SPECIAL WRITER

Sylvia Perle of West Bloomfield is perhaps best known as a medalist, in the world of art. No that doesn't mean she's won prizes (which she has), rather that she makes medals.

It's an art form long recognized in Europe, less so in the United States.

"In Europe, a big company will often commission a medal for a commemorative gift for a retirement, a wedding, a renaissance," she said.

Perle's metal hand-held sculptures are created in two ways. Either the medals are an intricate assemblage of various metals which she designs, cuts, polishes and attaches, or they are cast bronzes done by the lost-wax process.

Ironically, recognition of her work has been slow in coming in her home area. But gradually, that's changing.

Two years ago the Cultural Council of Birmingham Bloomfield commissioned Perle to create the bronze medal (about the size of a butter plate) for its annual Cultural

Arts award. (This year's award went to Maggie Alleece of Bloomfield Hills.)

Currently, Perle has three works on public display and another slated for next year.

Her bronze pedestal piece, "Dancers," was recently installed at the corner of Pierce and Merrill in downtown Birmingham. The installation is part of the Cityscapes program sponsored by the Cultural Council.

Another of Perle's small-scale sculpture entitled, "Mad Cow," will be on display as part of the "Handheld Sculptures of the 1990s" exhibit, which opens at the British Museum in London in December. Perle is only one of five American artists in the show.

The British Museum bought Perle's piece for its collection when it was shown last year at a juried show at The Hague.

Another of Perle's hand-held sculptures, "Auschwitz," was honored with a mention in the Helen DeRoy competition at Oakland Community College this fall.

The piece is from Perle's genocide series. Along with the shocking images of the Nazi concentration camp are the mocking words that were at the entrance, "Arbeit

macht frei," (tr. "Work makes you free").

An earlier sculpture from her series is on the wall in the entry to her home. The piece commemorates the Armenian genocide at the hands of the Turks. On this tragic reminder, Perle used a 1939 quote from Hitler, "Who now remembers the Armenians?"

"I'm going to do more of these," she said. "But I tried to do them all. I'd be busy forever."

A recent work about land mines titled, "The Gator," was recently accepted for an international exhibition in Weimar, Germany next year.

Perle has done extensive research on land mines. This particular one is the American-made BLU 92 B. "It's called an anti-personnel mine," she said. "It is dropped (like a bomb), but doesn't explode on impact. It has delayed detonation."

Her hinged, four-section piece is as beautifully wrought and assembled as fine jewelry and as haunting as a fresh battleground.

Still, many of her hand-held works carry a lighter tone. Recently she completed a millennium medal, a Detroit medal and several celebrating golf, intended as awards for major golf events.



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HOFFMEYER

Recognition: Sylvia Perle's small- and large-scale sculptures symbolize extraordinary accomplishments and commemorate unforgettable occasions.

Perle's road to becoming a medalist was circuitous.

"I always wanted to be an artist — a sculptor. My grandfather was a well-known sculptor in Frankfurt (Germany) between the wars. My dad's a surgeon and he said, 'I needed something I could fall back on.'"

While she was completing a master's degree in economic geography at University of Chicago, Perle met her husband, Eugene. She never did use that degree.

After they moved to Detroit where Eugene subsequently joined the Wayne State faculty, she studied art and sculpture at Center for Creative Studies. After attending a two-week workshop at Penn State on small medallion sculpture taught by some of the most prestigious artists in that field, her personal die was cast.

Perle's statement which accompanies her small pieces on exhibit, reads: "When accomplishment demands recognition, when life is exceptional, the idea extraordinary, let a small free standing solid bronze art medal commemorate this success."

"This sculpture may also celebrate a marriage, a divorce, retirement, happy or sad occasions, public and political events, and many other accomplishments."



AN EXHIBIT TO SEE

Works of masterful painter resonate

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
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The wait is over to observe, contemplate and appreciate the grand teacher's latest work.

In an exhibit at the Susanne Hilberry Gallery in Birmingham, students, collectors and appreciators of finely crafted paintings can view the most recent oil paintings of Robert Wilbert, whose technical mastery and tutelage has inspired hundreds of fledgling and established artists for more than four decades.

Wilbert, who taught painting at Wayne State for 38 years, might be retired from university teaching, but his current work demonstrates that his skills of observation have never been sharper.

"He's at the peak of his powers," said Susanne Hilberry, owner/director of the gallery that carries her name. "Robert's work has a certainty, assuredness and vibrancy."

While a retrospective of Wilbert's work from 1956-1995 was exhibited at Wayne State in the fall of 1995, it's been 10 years since the former Donald

WHAT: New Paintings of Robert Wilbert

WHEN: Through Jan. 8

WHERE: Susanne Hilberry Gallery, 555 S. Old Woodward, Birmingham

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; (248) 842-8250

Morris Gallery exhibited his most recent oil paintings.

In Wilbert's most-engaging paintings at the Hilberry Gallery, there's an indelible mood of contemplation. He may reference somewhat-eclectic subjects such as a vase of flowers or musical instruments, but the likeness and composition are far from mundane. Wilbert's elegant strokes resonant with a sense of purpose and patience.

And his compositions invariably offer something slightly off-beat or unexpected. For instance, he finds a fascinating juxtaposition among a flute, an electric fan, a billiards rack

and a model of a silver human head placed on its side.

Meanwhile, his depictions of floral arrangements are infused with a subtle movement, as if he's captured them at the moment of bloom or as they begin to wilt.

As a young painter in the 1950s, Wilbert experimented with abstract expressionism. But while his colleagues followed the course of de Kooning and abstract painters, Wilbert focused on composition and his brand of realism.

For years during his stay at his home along the shore of Lake Huron, Wilbert has painted sunrises. He once noted that it was by painting the same subject that he learned to observe the subtle changes from day to day.

In his recent paintings, Wilbert demonstrates that a painting that communicates the representations of flowers, chairs and musical instruments can evoke something more than a mere likeness.



Juxtapose: Robert Wilbert's still life paintings offer a subtle elegance and sometimes unexpected compositions.

As many of his students at Wayne State and the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center have realized, Wilbert's indelible contribution is his ability to engage viewers to look deeper at a subject. In Wilbert's finest work, it's not just a meditative quality but a willingness to take a new perspective.

The teacher's subject and influences obviously go well beyond the canvas.