

by DIANE HEILENMAN
Art Critic

Artswatch

Only about one-half the works in the third annual "Lavender Art & Craft Exhibit" clearly relate to a lesbian or gay theme, and all but one are essentially so well-behaved and oblique that the exhibit is more toothless hound than baying dog.

However, given the current climate, it's no surprise that press releases and a note on the gallery door warn: "The exhibit contains adult subject matter and viewer discretion is advised."

Rules to entrants in the competition stated that works had to deal with contradiction in some form, which might or might not relate to a lesbian or gay context. The exhibit, selected by a four-member local jury, is sponsored by the gallery and Gays and Lesbians United for Equality (GLUE) to mark Gay and Lesbian Pride Week, June 24-30.

Gallery director Linda Speer said that the current funding ruckus at the National Endowment for the Arts seems to have encouraged a slightly new breed of gallery-goer. Apparently, some people come in not to look at the art so much as to ask if any NEA funds were involved in producing the exhibit. She said the answer in this case is no.

This would be a tiresome thing to report were it not for a discernible trend that includes the flap over the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit that led to indictments in Cincinnati and the recent decision by officers of Louisville's Liberty National Bank to toss out of the Liberty Gallery a show that might, at most, offend Elvis Presley fans and possibly some religious groups. (See NOTES, this page.)

The point behind the "Lavender" exhibit — and Gay Awareness Week — is to muster attention and open-minded consideration for the reality of gay and lesbian lifestyles and contributions to our culture. It's fair to bet that folks who would not otherwise notice this small gallery with its unpretentious space and shoestring avant-garde productions now know about it.

If notoriety wins again, the exhibit does not necessarily win over the limitations of its space. The gallery is always marginal in aesthetics, and in this show the inelegant amateur look dominates because many of the works are small. Despite strong internal imagery, they simply can't hold the wall space.

Nonetheless, the exhibit has a broad national representation; the 13 artists are from Kentucky, Indiana, Virginia, New York, Iowa, Georgia, California, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Hawaii, Texas and Washington.

The artists took contradiction to mean everything from America's love/hate affair with petroleum to the Great American Let's Pretend Game, in which decorator styles published in glossy national magazines are created for women by gay men with the often, unspoken idea of appealing to straight men.

Brian Allen of Seattle indicts Americans' ostrich attitude toward oil in his paired photos. They contrast a photo of the cleaning of a boat used to clean up an oil spill with a photo of the Alaskan pipeline. The latter carries an anonymous environmentalist's inscription, "Where Will It All End?"

clares, in effect, that the emperor has no clothes in a series of angry but ultimately humorous images that float a blurred, black-and-white image of two men in an amorous clench over a sharp-focus, full-color decorator-magazine picture of some ideal home interior.

Smoke scores his points by playing his picture titles off the inane captions that accompany such magazine photographs. For instance, one of his works is called, "A patent-leather-black grand piano hints at livelier evenings."

With or without gay or lesbian content, all the art deals with identity crises.

Marlon Fuentes of Falls Church, Va., uses his "Face Fusion" series to explore the idea of self and other through close-up pictures of two faces pressed together. The series, represented at Artswatch by one photograph, is about the "struggle between identity and the fragmentation of self."

Debra Clem of Lexington, Ky., challenges male art history with wit and precision by projecting two women and symbols of feminism and lesbianism in the format of Holbein's painting "The French Ambassadors."

It's all rather civilized and contained until we come to a sculpture by Triny Cline and Mike Sherrer of Canton, Ga. The collaborative pair have produced what can only be called a generic genital portrait in bronze. Close inspection of the fragment of torso reveals that the vagina is "stitched" closed with silver wire. Cline and Sherrer's "Fundamentalist Dream Girl" is a gynecological specimen, sexual artifact and/or breeding machine.

The artists say their work is meant to suggest the limits that society and religions place on women and their fertility.

The exhibit at 2337 Frankfort Ave., Louisville, continues through June 30. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, noon to 4 p.m. Saturday.

REVIEWS

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