this page:

Matt Sesow DC Dictionary and Artomatic

2004
Intowner article, November 2004




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High-Energy Art-O-Matic

High-Energy Art-O-Matic Showing 650 Area Artists; City Museum's Rejected Exhibit Show Included

By Anthony L. Harvey

Resurrecting the colorful verve, high energy, and both polished and raw ambitions of artistic expression inaugurated in the first Art-O-Matic show held at the old Manhattan Laundry building on Florida Avenue a few years ago, this fourth "Art-O-Matic" opens Friday, November 12 in the fascinatingly dilapidated, 100–year-old convent school complex of the Little Sisters of the Poor at 3rd and H Streets, NE, most recently the location of the Children's Museum and soon to be part of the million-dollar lofts, shops, and office building development just announced by James Abdo Associates, also one of the show's sponsoring patrons. This magnificent site affords five floors filled with the works of 650 visual artists, plus performance spaces for such events as theater, poetry and rap, as well as several video installations, one with raked, ramp-like ledges for seats. All this will be ready for the Friday night opening being held from 7 p.m. to 1 p.m.

The individual artists and art groups have been self-selected for this enormous show, which is organized over these five floors (and their vast amounts of space) geographically–identified by the names of Metro stops neighborhoods. Viewers should plan multiple visits, both on days (and at times) when large crowds are expected and on slower, early afternoons during earlier days of the week. The show, for which admission is free, will be open every day except Mondays for a month, until December 5, when it closes and the art will then be auctioned off, the proceeds being split 50/50 between the artists and Art-O-Matic.



Chad Alan, *Part of the Problem* (bench); *Part of the Solution* (quilt).

One particular special addition to this year's show is a "show within a show"–an engagingly installed presentation of "Funky Furniture." This is the show that was summarily cancelled by the City Museum in October, just as its final installation was being completed inside its Mt. Vernon Square exhibition space, in the former Carnegie Library in which the Historical Society of Washington and its research library is also housed. While the museum's

Cont., ART-O-MATIC, p. 9

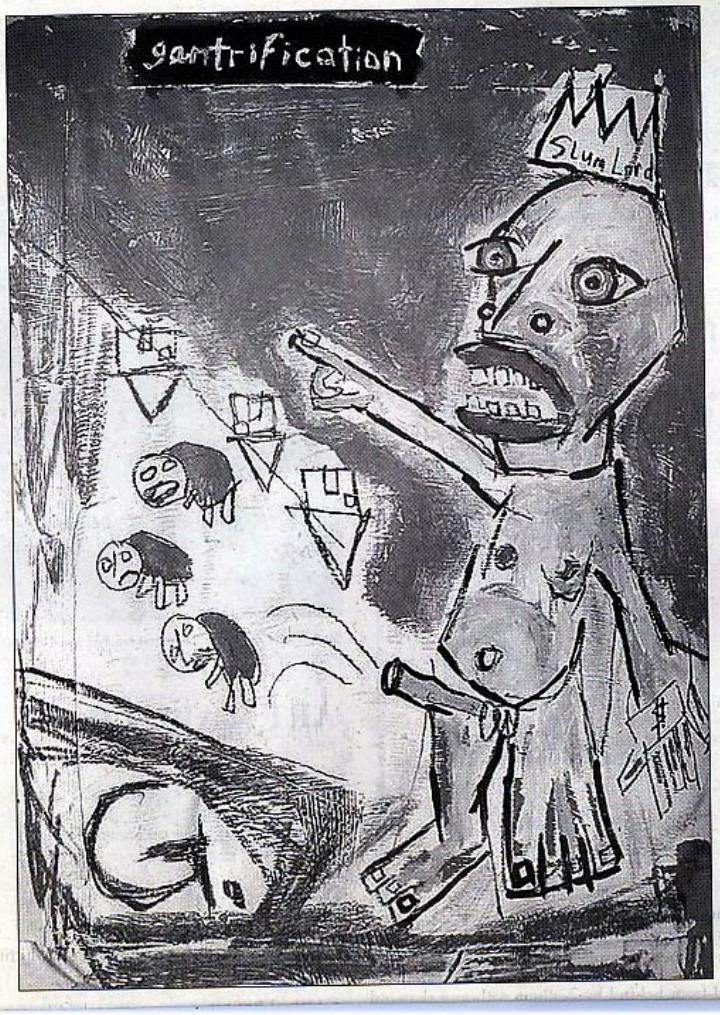
ART-O-MATIC

From p. 1

managers gave the reason that the works being installed were of a nature totally different from what they had understood would be the show's emphasis, both the show's curator Chad Alan and other local artists contend that the real reason for the sudden cancellation was that show contained "objectionable work and for being in the way of their aggressive use of City Museum exhibition space for party rentals." (As The InTowner was going to press, it was announced that the City Museum will be closing its doors to the public on November 28 and that access to the Historical Society's research library will only be by advance appointment.)

Others with whom The InTowner has interviewed, however, find the works to be both delightful and funny. Yet, at the same time, these works are also viewed by many observers as scathingly sad, for they reflect committed artists making insightful art works which convey their understandings of how "horribly inadequate" is the reality of life in Washington, especially when the context and content of their works are placed within the large, "deceitful context of the dominant culture's determined avoidance of how it really is." How this might be found objectionable, given the challenging and questioning insights we expect from artists, is baffling to those artists and many who have already had an opportunity to preview this "show within a show."

Viewers of "Funky Furniture" are led through a three-part past, present, and future series of spaces. Each houses one or more of the seven artists found, in Chad Alan's word, "objectionable" by the City Museum. The rooms begin with such artworks as Margery E. Goldberg's well-hung, dangling man; Jane Kerr's hilarious table-top slab of faux



Matt Sesow, "Gentrification."

caked cocaine entitled The Bitch Set Me Up; Dana Ellyn Kaufman's pair of large double-sided pillows containing composition which outline life as viewed through the artist's Logan Circle windows, titled Sweet Dreams and Real Nightmares; Katie Didrikses' King George [W. Bush and his business-suited retainer Dick Cheney] as impersonators of Manet's famous painting, Olympia, the reclining nude woman with her body servant standing-by. A dominant work in the second area is Matt Sesow's large Washington dictionary, with an illustration for each letter of the alphabet as well as one each for the front and back covers; opened to "G" for gentrification shows little people being urinated on by a very big person. Other objected-to works are Naomi Campbell's droll, mounted trophy board of a gun surrounded by roses and Roger Cutler's representation of what he views as the Bush administration's assault on scientific knowledge, memorialized by the artist's scorched books and elevated juvenilia as the cover for the George W. Bush presidential library.

Curator Chad Alan's incendiary (but apparently overlooked) work is a double-pairing of furniture and furnishings featuring an AIDS quilt hanging above an old-fashioned wooden bench which has stenciled on its veneer Bob Hope's AIDS joke at the 1986 celebration of the Statue of Liberty (with President Reagan and then French President Mitterand in attendance.) Another remarkable work is David Mills' moving sculpture All in One Piece which combines lush ferns and other green plant forms with barbed wire and a cracked globe; its message must have been too visually subtle for the would be "objectioners."

Cont., ART-O-MATIC, p. 18

Page 18 • The InTowner • November 2004

ART-O-MATIC

From p. 9

Whatever, "Funky Furniture" is one of the bright stars of this Art-O-Matic, and several of its participants have outstanding installations elsewhere in the larger venue.

Matt Sesow, for example, has a wall of edgy, aggressively confrontational and strikingly colorful expressionist portraits, including representations of the first 100 American soldiers killed in the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Dana Ellyn Kaufman's wonderfully, almost cartoon-like figure, with their deft ideas and imagery are displayed in a large space, including her "flash art" images painted on the reverse of discarded three-by-five library catalog cards. Chad Alan has his own large installation in the central atrium–a powerful, large altar-like piece with three panels, the side panels featuring images of the great actions on the great days of creation, with the center panel featuring a more traditional Madonna and Child. This contemporary subversion of a grand, classical theme is entitled On the Eighth Day, God Created Money.

But there is vastly more to contemplate here.

In addition to the offerings of the 30 artists of "Funky Furniture," the range of creative output by the other 620 artists in this show is extraordinary. Brightly colored, jagged-edged expressionist paintings vie for the eye and the emotion's attention with cool and restrained high-end historic photographs, beautifully printed. A sound and light installation, complete with a love seat, is juxtaposed on the same floor with a severe, conceptual "room" constructed on a carefully carpeted raised flooring which is bisected by a row of slender, cylindrical white poles evenly spaced to allow ample visual but no physical penetration. A four-floor in height slender stairwell sculpture of small stuffed animals by Richard Dana enlivens one grand corner of the building. A room of Ben Classen's paintings features a charming conceit of a cowboy-like figure riding an alligator as though on horseback. Adjacent rooms feature films from the heroic 1920s and early 1930s Soviet Union, with a tattoo artist nearby. Rooms and gallery areas with lights and sounds and wild images are offset by large gallery areas of paintings and sculptures by artists who may be more mature and possess greater fine arts and sculptural craft skills and traditions. There is, then, on display something for all tastes and sensibilities.

The InTowner was guided through a pre-opening preview of this huge show by Washington glass artist Tim Tate–generous in his praise and explication of the work of fellow artist–whose glass creations include riffs on the enduring symbol of the sacred heart, for example, which mix memory and desire in deftly created glass reliquaries; we look forward to subsequent visits when the entire show is complete, including the many smaller shows within shows, including artists from individual neighborhoods, glass artists from the now-closed Millennium Arts Center that had been formerly housed in a former school building in Southwest (but now has been promised by the city to the Corcoran Gallery of Art for its art school's use), collegiate affinity groups, and artists who simply work together, for example at the Torpedo Factory. □



Work by Chad Alan

Art-O-Matic on view from November 12 through December 5 inside of the former Children's Museum building at 3rd and H Streets, NE. Not to be missed!



"DC, A to Z"
from a book painted by Sesow for exhibit at Washington, DC City Museum (Oct. 2004)
12" x 9"
acrylic/mixed on book
(pages 1-2)



"DC, A to Z"
from a book painted by Sesow for exhibit at Washington, DC City Museum (Oct. 2004)
12" x 9"
acrylic/mixed on book
(pages 3-4)



"DC, A to Z"
from a book painted by Sesow for exhibit at Washington, DC City Museum (Oct. 2004)
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acrylic/mixed on book
(pages 5-6)



"DC, A to Z"
from a book painted by Sesow for exhibit at Washington, DC City Museum (Oct. 2004)
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(pages 9-10)



"DC, A to Z"
from a book painted by Sesow for exhibit at Washington, DC City Museum (Oct. 2004)
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(pages 11-12)



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from a book painted by Sesow for exhibit at Washington, DC City Museum (Oct. 2004)
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(pages 13-14)



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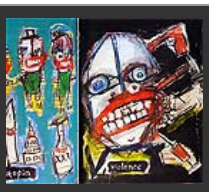
(pages 19-20)



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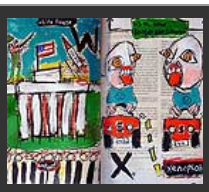
(pages 21-22)



"DC, A to Z"
from a book painted by Sesow for exhibit at Washington, DC City Museum (Oct. 2004)
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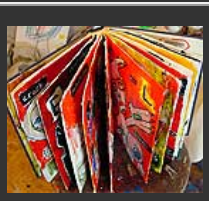
acrylic/mixed on book
(pages 23-24)



"DC, A to Z"
from a book painted by Sesow for exhibit at Washington, DC City Museum (Oct. 2004)
12" x 9"
acrylic/mixed on book
(pages 25-26)



"DC, A to Z"
outside of book
12" x 9"
acrylic/mixed on book
(book view from outside)



"DC, A to Z"
inside of book
12" x 9"
acrylic/mixed on book
(book view from inside)





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