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Washington Post writes about cancelled show

Matt Sesow's "DC Dictionary' included in controversy
October 2004

The Washington Post

Friday, October 8, 2004

Ailing City Museum Cancels 'Funky' Show

Planned Exhibit Called Unsuitable

By Jacqueline Trescott
Washington Post Staff Writer

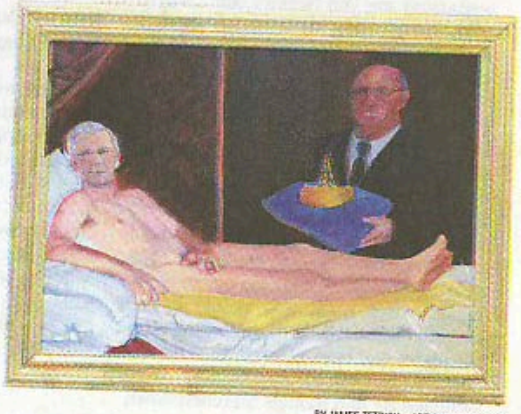
To the troubled City Museum of Washington, an exhibition by local artists seemed just the hip solution to attract a new, desperately needed audience.

But instead "Funky Furniture," a show of painted living room pieces, has been evicted by the museum because some of the artists' themes were considered unsuitable.

The furniture display, a project organized by Art-O-Matic 2004, a volunteer confederation of mainly local artists, was moved into the museum last weekend and was scheduled to open this month. The theme was a takeoff on the museum's desire to be known as "the city's living room."

One artist decorated a church pew with pictures and quotes to allege that President Ronald Reagan was indifferent to the AIDS crisis. Another took an end table and plastered it with drug paraphernalia and a quote from former mayor Marion Barry, who was jailed for drug possession. Another created a coffee-table-size dictionary with

See MUSEUM, *C8, Col. 1*



BY JAMES TETRICK—ART-O-MATIC 2004

Kayti Didriksen's picture was part of the "living room" art that City Museum had hoped would boost attendance.

Museum Sends 'Furniture' Back

MUSEUM, *From C1*

Washington entries, such as "A Is for Anthrax" and "G Is for Gentrification," illustrated by a drawing of a white male urinating on African American residents.

And what is a living room without a prominent painting? Kayti Didriksen, a local artist, decided to paint President Bush and Vice President Cheney in the well-known style of Manet's "Olympia." Bush is nude and reclining on a chaise longue, and Cheney, in a suit and tie, is holding a velvet pillow with a crown topped by an oil rig.

The City Museum's executive committee decided yesterday that the museum was "not an appropriate venue for this event."

The museum is primarily a facility for local and regional history and is operated by the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. It has severely overestimated its potential audience and revenue: From its opening in May 2003 through August, it had 36,536 paying patrons, compared with the 100,000 to 450,000 that had been projected.

"This is not what we had bargained for. We thought we were getting functional furniture," said Leslie Shapiro, co-chairman of the museum board. Shapiro and Sean Duffey, another board member, said yesterday that the political content was not an overriding factor in the decision not to go ahead.

"I don't think I was judging it on that basis," Shapiro said. "What we are not is an art gallery. There are probably places this should go." She said she was disappointed the arrangement didn't work out.

The exhibit would have been the first art show at the museum, housed in the historic Carnegie Library on Ninth Street NW, just opposite the Washington Convention Center.

But the board decided the work did not meet its vision of the show or the expectations of the teachers who bring in schoolchildren—the majority of the visitors the museum has been able to lure so far. "It wasn't consistent with the mission of the museum," Duffey said.

The artists are upset.

"I am shocked and disappointed, considering that the museum is struggling to make ends meet. They were not willing to go out on a limb with a group of emerging artists," said Chad Alan, a co-chairman of the show and the creator of the Reagan/AIDS pew. "The artists told a true story, and each city has dark sides."

Jim Tretick, a member of the executive committee of Art-O-Matic, said: "We are used to showing in galleries, where art is art and you get what you get. This is a museum with a different clientele, and it was not a good match."

Alan said the artists are looking for a new venue and have pledged to keep the show intact.

The museum did not oversee the assembly of the show, which is the traditional method by which an art museum creates its own exhibit or controls a traveling show it has agreed to accept. The show grew out of a brainstorming session between a former museum official and an artists' representative. Alan said the artists were asked by Art-O-Matic's organizers to submit designs to him that would capture events and people in Washington in the whimsical fashion of the "Party Animals" public art competition. He said museum officials did know some of the themes.

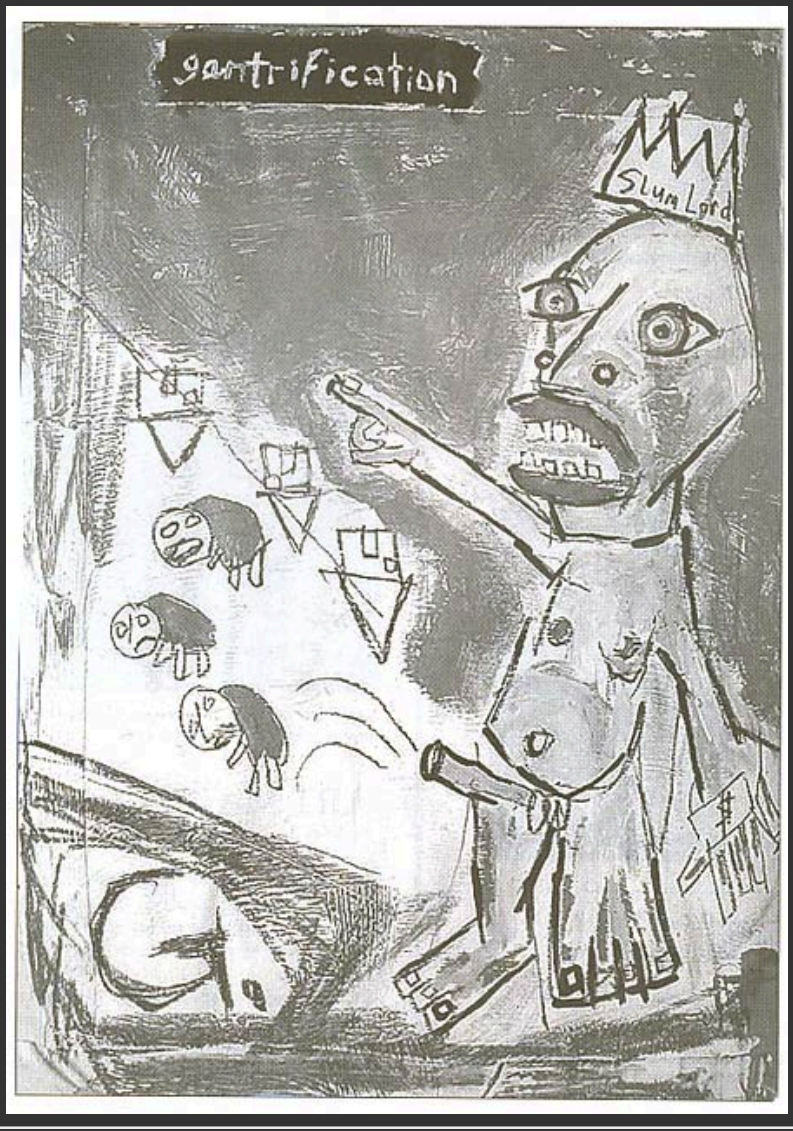
"They seemed excited about having the show," said artist Maggie O'Neill, a co-chairman of the show. She painted a long executive desk to resemble hot pink snakeskin and included a pink presidential seal to salute a future female president.

Shapiro and Duffey, however, said the first time they saw the material was yesterday. Monday, the day the artists started raising a furor over the possible cancellation of the show, happened to be the first day of work for Maureen Robinson, a management consultant hired to develop new ways to attract visitors to the museum.

After the art was installed last weekend, representatives of the museum said they were disappointed the pieces didn't come together as a traditional living room and that the designs didn't lend themselves to sitting or touching. Also, the initial assembly didn't have information that identified the concept or the artist.

"It was less interactive than the museum thought," said Tretick. He said the artists had planned to complete the labeling before the formal opening.

While the furniture event was being planned, both sides agreed that the pieces had to be movable to allow for party rentals of the main lobby, which provide the bulk of the museum's income. In August, a museum official said special events had brought in $415,000, compared with $78,000 from admissions. After the furniture show, the artists planned to auction off the items, with 25 percent going to the museum.





"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)
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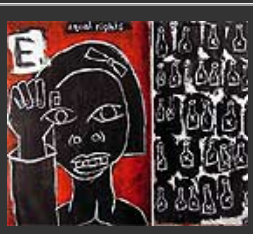
acrylic/mixed on book
(pages 3-4)



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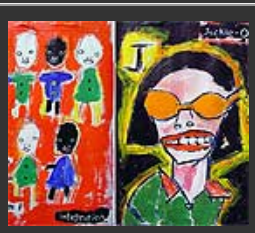

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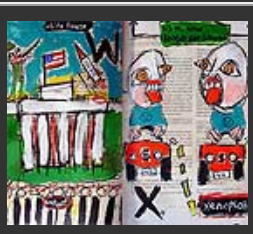

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"DC, A to Z"
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acrylic/mixed on book
(pages 25-26)



"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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