

Northfield resident featured in Cleveland Institute of Art show

by Elaine T. Cicora
Correspondent

Two photographs by former Northfield Center resident John Bonath are featured in this year's second annual Cleveland Institute of Art (CIA) national alumni art show.

"Drawn Together," a juried show on view at the Reinberger Galleries in the institute's Gund Building through Aug. 23, features 84 works of art created by 68 CIA alumni.

Speaking from his Denver studio, Bonath, class of '74, said he was pleased to be included in the exhibit for the second year.

"It's a show that gets a lot of attention," the photographer and computer graphics artist said last week. "I'm honored to be part of it."

Bonath is a 1969 graduate of Nordon Hills High School. He completed a bachelor of fine arts degree at CIA in photography and printmaking, and went on to earn his master's of fine arts degree at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Mich.

He moved to Fort Collins in 1978, designing and developing the bachelor of fine arts degree program in photography at Colorado State University before launching his own successful business, MADDOG Studio, in Denver, in 1991.

At MADDOG, Bonath specializes in fine art work and commercial product photography as well as running a graphics design business doing computer layout/design and computer imaging services, while pursuing multiple personal art projects.

As an artist, Bonath has drawn worldwide attention. A list of his professional recognitions takes up half a page of fine print on his resume and includes serving as featured panelist the 1997 Midlands Invitational Art Show in Omaha, Neb. as well as being the topic of feature articles in View Camera Magazine and Italy's ZOOM Magazine.

Along the way, he's found time to teach English in Japan for two years; serve as art director for Poudre Magazine; and perform as a member of a professional folk dance company. He is also the father of a 4-year-old son, Casey.

His two works in the CIA show, "Rubbing Two Sticks" and "Ode to Frida Kahlo, Hasta que la Muerte nos Aparte (Until Death Do Us Part)," are part of a series of 10 surreal black and white photographs he calls "Portraits from the New Age."

Each of the works features a model – mostly Bonath's friends and acquaintances – encrusted with cracked mud of various shades and textures and garbed in an easily recognizable "social uniform:" a bride's gown, a Boy Scout uniform, a business suit or kimono, for example.

Bonath says the mud, a special formulation of creamy porcelain slip and iron oxide, is used to represent both the primal roots of human nature and the deterioration of inner, individual character beneath the facade of social expectations.

"The work is meant to simply ask the questions, 'Who are we?' and 'What is the process that forms an individual's self identity within a given social structure?'" he says.

Technically, Bonath says he gets the peculiar shadings and depth that mark the works by using a selective process of tinting and bleaching the images on special photographic paper.

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Bonath's "Ode" was one of six pieces at this year's show to be awarded a \$600 cash prize for excellence from the Katherine and Lee Chilcote Foundation.

Other works in the series have been on display at museums and galleries throughout the Denver area, including the University of Colorado's Emmanuel Gallery, the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center and the Denver Art Museum.

While the 1997 alumni art show was criticized in some quarters as bland and lackluster, Bonath's work was singled out by critics as an exception.

His computer-manipulated photographic still life, "Birth Rights," filled with butterflies, wood shavings and a pair of floating mannequin hands reminiscent of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, was praised as possessing "a subtle and disturbing hallucinatory surrealism," by Plain dealer Art Critic Steven Litt. The work also earned Bonath a cash award at the 1997 show.

This year's show seems likely to garner greater critical praise, with a number of lively works in photography, oil, acrylic, glass, metal, fiber and mixed media.

"With 15 different art majors represented, the show is understandably an overview, not an in-depth study, of any one style," says Kimberly Watts, CIA director of alumni relations. "So far, reaction has been quite positive."

Meanwhile, Bonath says he has returned to creating highly manipulated digital art works, this time blending natural forms with human shapes in a series he is calling "Nature Spirits."

"This is the direction that will take me places," in the art work, he predicts. "But it's a very expensive process. That's where this prize money is going to go!"