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Metro Pictures: Art or Madness?

by Hunter Drohojowska

There is an art show in town now that features vacant-eyed victims staring from the walls, their faces contorted in silent Munchian screams, these images painted in broad swipes of muddy color. The faces peer out from a forest of scatological graffiti — black spray paint that snakes out messages of anti-Semitism, misogyny and unmistakable hatred towards the authority of Metropolitan State Hospital (MSH) in Norwalk, an institution for the mentally ill.

These unsettling murals are smeared across the walls of Exile Gallery in downtown Los Angeles, put there by two artists, George Shelton and Joe Harris. The pair have been working as unpaid volunteers with the art program at MSH for six years and three years, respectively. Last May the program was suddenly suspended so that the hospital administration, under the direction of Dr. Sam Rapport, could "reevaluate such issues as the goal and purpose of the art program, supervision of the personnel involved, and accordingly attempt to develop a new program which could be integrated into the overall goals of the hospital."

So, at least, said a memo from Tim Kusler, chief of central program services at the hospital. Bernice Kent, his assistant, responded with a new program designed to eliminate Shelton and Harris' spontaneous approach.

Until then, patients could "drop in" the studio whenever they chose, and the artists and patients collaborated on the same canvases without hospital supervision. Through a non-profit organization, Face to Face, they obtained their own materials, and even staged the occasional exhibition. When work was sold, 60 percent went to the patients, 40 percent to buy more supplies.

When he altered this system, Dr. Rapport has said, it was because he felt the program needed more "clinical accountability." In other words, doctors, nurses and social workers would be involved in the art program, and the artists would no longer be autonomous. Shelton and Harris, sensing the demise of their program and fearing that the existing work might be destroyed, smuggled out some 300 canvases without the knowledge of the hospital staff.

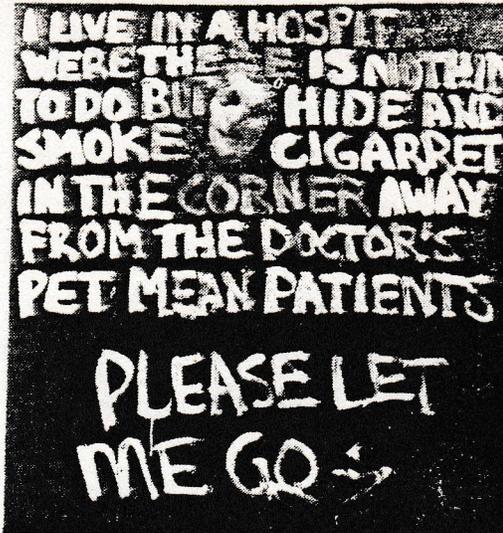
These canvases are hung atop the aforementioned savage wall paintings by the artists, creating an installation so powerful that almost any dramatic adjective seems an understatement. Admittedly, the appeal is sensationalistic; there is a perverse yet compelling attraction to this glimpse of the workings of disturbed

minds. The effect is titillating and somewhat shameful, like reading tales of horror in the *National Enquirer*.

The major reason for this is the exhibition is grounded in the popular myth of the artist as madman, the crazed genius unrecognized by an indifferent society. The theory is reinforced by the adroit techniques displayed in the works: skillful brushwork, a refined use of color and image. Then, one must recall that each painting is a collaboration between artist and patient, and it is impossible to discern where one leaves off and the other begins. The impact is to enhance the dramatic effect of the work, married as the patient's visions are to skillful techniques.

Of their art program, Shelton says, "The concept was artists working with mental patients on the same canvas." But in close evaluation of both the wall paintings done by the two artists and the canvases that are, purportedly, the work of the patients, stylistic similarities appear salient — in the faces, in the lettering technique, in the thematic consistency. Shelton explains, "What we're trying to do is interpret what we've learned from working with patients." Harris adds, "We've influenced the patients and they've influenced us."

Shelton, 40, works as a street painter for the City of Beverly Hills. He had been a volunteer in the art program at MSH for three years when Harris joined the hospital. Harris, 30, had worked as an artist in mental hospitals in Germany, where he went to art school. Being of independent financial means, Harris says that he spends 35 to 40 hours a week as a volunteer at the MSH art program. Both say they are exploiting the hospital to work with the patients. Neither artist does artwork independently of their involvement at MSH. Harris explains the attraction, "We went to the hospital because there was a general need for expression of the patients through their self-anger. It was superior to anything I saw in any art gallery in L.A." He continues, "There's a frenzy and intensity you don't find anywhere else. A need you don't find among people who work in rented studios." Shelton subscribes to a similar fascination: "I learned art from the patients. I had only a disciplined craft background that was highly commercial, before going to the hospital. I just like the



way the patients approach the canvas. They're not concerned with sales, just with expression. So I began to copy the patients."

The artists claim that the premise of the exhibition is a political protest against the controls the hospital placed upon their art program, as well as to provide a view of the horrific life of the wards. "The exhibition is an extension of what the hospital will not allow and what the public doesn't know. The policy of the hospital is that it's better to have nothing by the patients than something that might make waves," Harris reported. "Everyone who sees this show should be locked up for 24 hours at MSH. Then they'll see there's not such a distinct line between being crazy and uncrazy. Stuck in a hospital and treated like a three-year-old, after all the medication they give, we would all wonder, ourselves, whether or not we are three-year-olds."

While the viewer can accept the artists' politics, the question of authorship is problematic, at best. There is no way to determine whether these examples of unbridled expression may be excused to a patient or the artists. As none of the paintings are signed, to whom does one assign the responsibility for art that is so blatantly misanthropic? While Shelton and Harris insists this is to protect the identity of the individual patients, ones speculate that the measure protects the artists, as well.

What does seem clear is that the artists themselves take great stock in the Van Gogh myth. Harris affirms, "I think it's a shame that anybody educated in art would question that anybody who's locked-up and drugged can't perform art better than they can." Shelton adds, "I think that business and academics control art because they can't create art. It's without control that you create art." This is an argument for art as pure expression, breaking through rational constraints to capture some hidden repressed vision. However, it overlooks the fact that, contrary to his portrayal as a mad genius in *Lust for Life*, Van Gogh's art was great because he used it to fight against his encroaching insanity. A lifetime was spent battling to retain self-control, not to seek self-expression.

During the recent resurgence of neo-expressionism, critics have noted that everyone is looking for the new Van

Grey Crawford

Gogh, and it's true. Van Gogh barely sold a painting in his life, and society doesn't want another mad genius to slip through its grasp unrecognized and unmarketed. Hence, the times are rife with examples of pure expression, many taken seriously. And certainly, the paintings in this exhibition are fraught with pressure and angst, barely held within the parameters of the picture frame.

Yet one recalls a quote by William H. Gass, "If life is hard, art is harder." While this work is an expression of life, is it art? If the two artists had simply tapped their experiences at MSH to produce a compelling installation of their own, or had displayed works that were purely the output of mental patients, the exhibition would stand as a clear example of either art or anthropology. As of now, the images are undeniably powerful but amount to screaming in the void. Without the substance of lucid intent, the show serves up mostly cheap thrills.

The show continues through the month of September at Exile Gallery, 110 Winston Street, downtown. The paintings are for sale for the rock-bottom prices of \$5 to \$15, proceeds to go to patients or to a future art program. Artist-run Exile is not a participant of LAVA but will be open during LAVA festival hours, 12 to 6 Saturday and Sunday, and certainly offers an interesting alternative to tamer gallery fare. ■

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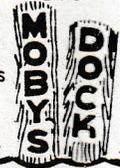
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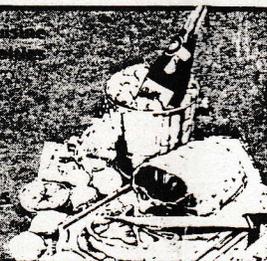


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