

Lowell museum wants to be agent of change



By David Weber, Associated Press Writer | December 20, 2006

LOWELL, Mass. --Revolving Museum director Jerry Beck believes art can solve society's problems. And he believes the very process of solving those problems constitutes art.

The motto emblazoned across the Revolving Museum's entrance is, "Evolve With Us." Beck wants the museum's artworks to ignite thought and conversation.

The museum's current exhibit, "Race, Class, Gender (do not equal) Character," explores the ways bigotry and violence contaminate humanity. Its title proclaims that a person's character is not determined by race, gender or social class.

"Our museum is kind of an anti-museum. Most museums are about sterility, where you can't touch anything. Where a curator decides what's a great work of art and what's not," Beck said. "Why can't a conversation with a kid be a great work of art? Can art change a neighborhood? We're trying to push the envelope."

The works in the current exhibit, on loan from a museum in Baltimore, Md., include a wood sculpture of Muhammad Ali, fists raised and wearing boxing trunks. A sign on the statue's pedestal displays the champ's words: "Hurting people because of their color is wrong, and it doesn't matter who does the hurting. It's just plain wrong."

A series of embroidered tapestries created by a South African artist show violent scenes from the apartheid era. Some show white men chasing black men with clubs and guns. Others show black men doing the same to white men. Another shows a man standing back while a woman is consumed by flames.

Beck invited local artists to contribute works that echo the theme. Pam Goncalves created a mixed-media collage of an American flag accompanied by a painting of three black men with nooses around their necks. Closer inspection of the flag reveals that its white stripes contain the typewritten names of lynching victims from throughout the United States. Most of the lynchings occurred between 1910 and 1939.

In keeping with its egalitarian credo, the Revolving Museum does not charge an admission fee.

"I always come in and check out the new exhibits. It's kind of an exciting place. I definitely see it as vibrant and inspiring. I'm looking for inspiration," said artist and puppeteer Dave Huckins, 37, of Chelmsford.

Brian Morrison, 35, of Portsmouth, N.H., visited the museum for the first time and said, "It's very impressive. It's very authentic and fresh."

Located at the corner of two cobblestone streets -- Middle and Shattuck -- the museum occupies a 19th-century brick building that once housed the Lowell Light & Gas Co.

"This was the place that illuminated the city. Here we are in a building where people came to pay for their gas and electric," Beck said.

He said the Revolving Museum was born 25 years ago in Boston's Fort Point Channel area when the art colony was in its embryonic stage. Rising rents displaced the museum five years ago, and the city of Lowell invited Beck to move north.

"Lowell aggressively recruited us," he said, adding that government grants and cooperative city officials facilitated the acquisition of the building.

He noted Lowell's commitment to art is not new. The city seal bears the words, "Art is the Handmaid of Human Good."

Beck's vision includes community participation in art, and the city's school students help produce large public pieces that dot the Lowell landscape at different times and places.

"We are like the pebble that falls into the pond, and we want to echo out as far as we can from the center," he said. ■

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