

Visionary exhibition of blind artists

BY ED BOWERS

At the moment, I am observing a photograph by a legally blind artist named Michael Jameson. The photo is from the Lighthouse for the Blind's 2007 Annual Insight art exhibit. It's titled "Messy Oak Mudslinger," and rarely have I seen a depiction of an animal — in this case a rodeo bull named Messy Oak Mudslinger — that so nakedly reveals the underlying awareness and intelligence concealed by the animal mind that the human mind, suffering terminal egotism, rarely glimpses.

This particular bull is the grandfather and father of rodeo bulls currently hoofing it on the longhorn circuit. There is an infinite amount of wisdom, guts and knowledge in this bull's face that has so brilliantly been captured by the photographer.

Perhaps being legally blind cuts through the human image sufficiently that the person can actually see other life forms better than someone who is too full of himself, and enables the artist to perceive that creatures, other than humans, are full of life and thought.

At the current exhibit's reception, I observed a digital drawing on canvas by Sharon Hayes titled "Self Comfort," an elegant, graceful representation of the need, or desire, to go inside yourself. A young black woman, who appears naked, is holding her head to her knees and thinking deeply. It succeeds like few drawings do in the West in representing the meditative mind as a poignant, vulnerable and erotic power.

This is the Lighthouse's 19th "Insights" art exhibit, and in last's years catalog, Charles Curtis Blackwell, who also exhibited last year and whose work I reviewed in Central City Extra a couple of years ago, mentions in his short autobiography that he uses "(his) blindness as an asset ..."

I believe this statement to be the key to appreciating each year's exhibit not as a sentimental and condescending gesture of charity to blind people, but as a serious display of art that is every bit as insightful and visionary and profound as that done by people with so-called 20/20 vision.

In fact, there is nothing handicapped about the artists at this exhibition. We are all born in the dark and no one sees much of anything at all but what his limited mind allows him to observe. The human world is pretty much a mystery. We bump around in the dark thinking we're smart while creating wars and calamities. We live in fear. We kid ourselves.

Children are afraid of the dark. But there's something they find delightfully exciting about that fear.

In the dark all possibilities exist, and if you can make friends with the fear, then it turns into curiosity, courage and an infinite range of possibilities concealed in the darkness of the mind. I hate to sound like a positive thinker, but all the positive solutions come out of negativity and darkness.

After studying the "Insights" art catalogues displaying the work of this year's and last's exhibition, it finally became clear to



Kurt Weston's photograph is among the many insightful works in the Lighthouse for the Blind's 19th annual art exhibit.

me that the word "handicapped" is either a con game played by the human mind on the human mind or an ironic joke.

The "Insights" artists have invisible eyes. They are visionaries.

Though legally blind, they are capable of seeing clearly visions that other people who are handicapped by a more solidified reality don't, won't or can't perceive.

Kurt Weston, who used to be a successful fashion photographer, in 1991 was diagnosed with AIDS and later became legally blind due to a related condition, CMV retinitis. He uses his camera as an extension of himself. He is a survivor.

One viewer walked by and was affected by how weird Weston's photography appeared to him. That, as far as I am concerned, is a good review, because "weird" challenges people to think.

My favorite Weston photograph is of a man who appears to be horrified by what he sees while holding a camera to the right of his head in order to photograph himself. As I was writing a review of this photograph on a legal pad, an elderly man walked up to me and declared the photograph remarkable.

What happens with really good art is that it challenges each person's mind in a provocative way. The art at this exhibition does just that.

Charles Blackwell's portrayals of jazz musicians in ink and acrylic precisely capture the Pain and Ecstasy and Joy of a music

I have loved for almost 50 years. They swing.

The other artists at this exhibition are wonderful too, but I would have to turn Central City Extra into an art forum to do them justice. Relative space and time have their limitations.

Go to this exhibit if you have any interest in art at all. These artists are alive and struggling and need your appreciation NOW.

You'll get a free catalog, and an education.

Careful perusal of this art will affect you in a profound way forever.

P.S. Kim Shuck is the curator of this show and should be given all the credit she deserves for facilitating this wonderful project. ■

What: "Insights – 2008," Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired art exhibit: paintings, sculpture, photography, "touchable art."

Where: S.F. Arts Commission Gallery, lower level, in City Hall.

When: Oct. 2 to Dec. 12, 8 a.m. – 6 p.m. weekdays.

Peer Support Line **575-1400**

Office of Self-Help

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