

Changing Hearts and Minds: The Arts as Society's Conscience

by Jennifer Hafer and Lauren Highfill

Envision a fiery orange canvas with a dozen square images of an empty and blackened electric chair. This image, entitled "Orange Disaster," is Andy Warhol's 1963 creation that speaks out from the paint about how the media desensitizes the public to death and violence. But Warhol wasn't the first or the last artist to create a work that serves as a mirror to the public, reflecting images that enact social change.

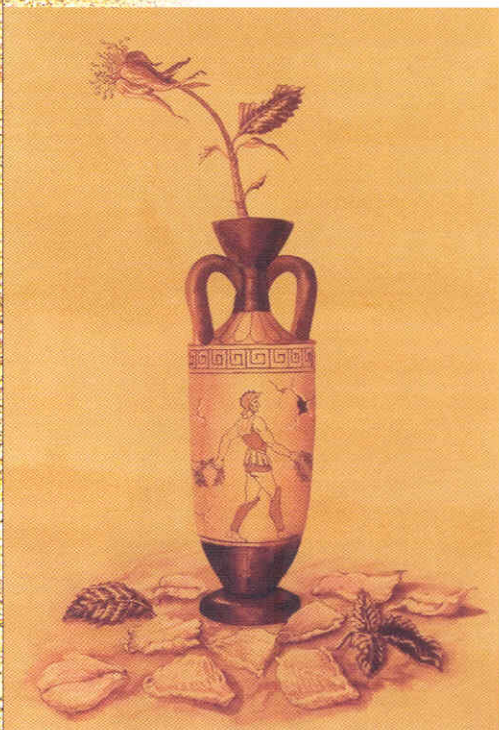
Some are well known, like John Lennon, who composed "Give Peace a Chance" during the Vietnam era, and Richard O'Brien, who wrote the 1970s screenplay "The Rocky Horror Show," which was a groundbreaking stage production that gave voice to "taboo" lifestyles. You may be less familiar with another influential and important artist: Pearl Primus. As a dancer in the 1940s, Primus controversially integrated oppression and racial issues into her choreography.

These artists and their contemporaries have paved the way for the social activism of today's artists and arts organizations. Although modern artists may shed light on issues that differ from their predecessors, the act of using art as a tool for social commentary remains the same.

One of these modern artists is Robert Sherer, assistant professor of art at Kennesaw State University. Sherer began his career painting "safe, nice products to match the couch." In the mid-1980s he was inspired to drastically change his message and his technique. At the time, the human immunodeficiency virus was reaching epidemic proportions in the United States. Thousands were dying, including friends of Sherer's, but the public—and the healthcare system—was still largely uninformed and biased about HIV, believing it was strictly a "gay man's disease."

"I was angry that people actually believed a virus was prejudicial," Sherer says. His anger and passion for healthcare reform inspired Sherer to create "Blood Works," a collection of drawings inked with HIV-positive blood. "I have to make socially conscious art because of my friends who died as a result of neglect from the system," Sherer says. (For more about "Blood Works," see the sidebar on page 15.)

Health issues are a topic for many artists and graphic designers, including Associate Professor of Art Carole Maugé-Lewis. Maugé-Lewis collaborated with Timothy Akers, assistant dean for research in the WellStar College of Health and Human Services at KSU, to



A Robert Sherer original from his "Blood Works" series.

Carole Maugé-Lewis was presented the 2006 Distinguished Teaching Award by Dean Joseph Meeks, in part because of the way she involves her students in socially conscious projects.



Photo by Kaye Burkett.

One of the ads designed by Carole Maugé-Lewis.

“shock” the public into realizing the importance of knowing a partner’s sexual health and history.

The design of their “Know the Facts Before You Act” campaign exploits the public’s obsession with body image. Pictured on billboards, bus wraps, posters and other materials are disconnected shots of a man’s bulging biceps, tight abs and muscular torso. A woman is pictured with slender, toned legs, a flat stomach and a long, graceful neck. Maugé-Lewis and Akers decided to starkly contrast these “ideal” images with grim facts about the individuals’ sexual histories. Merging the familiar with the unexpected, these facts appear as a nutrition label on the pictured body parts. Maugé-Lewis says, “As artists, we have a big responsibility to make sure what we’re communicating promotes a cause or provokes thought.”

“Offering Reconciliation,” a joint exhibit by Israeli and Palestinian artists, is doing exactly that. The birthplace of this exhibit, Israel, is in a region plagued with deep-rooted social issues. But “Offering Reconciliation” and its worldwide tour offer hope, healing and a chance for change.

For the showcase, 135 artists from both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were commissioned to personally decorate their own ceramic “bowl of reconciliation.” The resulting exhibit seeks to humanize the conflict and “shows that it isn’t just about guns, tanks and soldiers,” says Erika Vogel, executive director of the Association of Israel’s Decorative Arts (AIDA).



An “Offering Reconciliation” piece by Menashe Kadishman.



Photo courtesy of "Offering Reconciliation"



An "Offering Reconciliation" piece by Dani Karavan.

Originally designed to stay in Israel, the exhibit had such a powerful effect on visiting AIDA representatives that the organization worked with the exhibit's founders, the Parents Circle-Families Forum, to bring this message of peace to the United States.

Although the limited tour of "Offering Reconciliation" doesn't include a stop in Georgia, the exhibit has been shown in places where it can hope to have the largest impact, including the World Bank in Washington, D. C., and the United Nations in New York City.

The reactions to the exhibit have been powerful and surprising. "The exhibit gives people a wider perspective," Vogel says. "After seeing the art and hearing the stories of those who live there, people can no longer view the conflict as black or white or right or wrong." According to Vogel, "Offering Reconciliation" has already affected at least one congressman's thinking about the importance of addressing issues in the Middle East.

Changing minds is also one of the goals of the Atlanta-based Indo-American Film Society and its Indo-American Film Festival. Since 2000, the festival has been presented annually at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and was recently shown at several Atlanta-area universities.

One of the 2006 festival winners was a film directed by Praveen Morchhale entitled "Jhum Jham Jhum," which follows an Indian family living in the city who go back to their home village to visit family members. The film showcases the struggle many Indians and Indian Americans experience—the struggle between a more traditional life in India and the more Westernized culture found in many of the country's cities.

"The IAFF changes what people think of India and Indian Americans," says Ani Agnihotri, founder and executive director of IAFS and director of IAFF. "After seeing the films, many Americans realize similarities between the U.S. and India—like the great economy and common language—that they hadn't considered before. Several of my American friends have seen our films and talked about wanting to visit India and experience it for themselves because of the film."

Learning more about the world and our society can change the way people think, especially about a major tragedy. KSU Composer-in-Residence Laurence Sherr has honored the lives lost in major tragedies and the healing process of the survivors. Several of his compositions are performed at Holocaust remembrance services across the United States. Sherr has a profound connection to the Holocaust because his mother, Alice Bacharach Sherr, is the only member of her family to survive it. To honor her and to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Kristallnacht in 2002, Sherr composed "Fugitive Footsteps," a choral work inspired by a poem written by another survivor of the Holocaust, Nelly Sachs. The work was premiered at a special concert co-sponsored by the KSU College of the Arts and The Temple in Atlanta.

"There's a multifaceted purpose to the music I create," Sherr says. "Music shouldn't only entertain but it should also educate, heal and memorialize."

Photo courtesy of the IAFF



(From left) Ani Agnihotri, founder of the Indo-American Film Festival and actress Lisa Ray, from the Oscar-nominated film, "Water."

Robert Sherer's Blood Works

By Teresa Bagwell

Not many artists are more tangibly involved in raising social consciousness than Robert Sherer, KSU Associate Professor of Art. Since 1999, Sherer, seeking to raise HIV/AIDS awareness, has drawn blood from his own arm to supply the liquid medium used in a unique series of paintings aptly known as Blood Works. Since his first experimentation with blood as a medium, Sherer has created approximately 75 pieces in the series.

While medium and theme are both sensational and controversial, Sherer intends the underlying message to be both moral and educational. "The escalating HIV transmission rate in the heterosexual community results from a false sense of immunity," he warns. "The disease is spread by a virus that is completely indiscriminate of gender, race, sexual orientation or any other profiling characteristic."

Public reaction to the Blood Works series varies, but the pieces generally elicit strong emotional responses that evolve during the viewing process. Diminutive compared to Sherer's other works, the small size of the Blood Works pieces inspires a feeling of intimacy with the viewer. Their botanical images are lovely—even romantic. Soon into the viewing experience, enjoyment of the images' beauty shifts to shock or offense at the realization of the medium. Then, as the hidden moral is revealed, the viewer must consider the implications of the work, thus fulfilling Sherer's goal of social awareness.

Sherer's work has been shown regionally, nationally and internationally. In 2002, the series made its European premiere at the Triennale Internationale d'Art Contemporain in Paris. This past August, Kennesaw State University presented Sherer with the KSU Foundation Prize and the Distinguished Scholarship Award. The university will also host a retrospective exhibit of Blood Works, scheduled for Jan. 9 through March 11, 2008, in coordination with publishing a book on the subject.

In addition to these honors, Sherer will represent the United States in the Florence Biennale of Contemporary Art in Florence, Italy, in December 2007. The international art exhibition is one of the world's most prestigious competitions for contemporary art.



Robert Sherer



FEATURE STORY



Guests at a Holocaust Commemoration co-sponsored by the KSU College of the Arts and the Georgia Holocaust Commission.

Photo by Elizabeth Williams

This motivation rings true whether Sherr is creating a piece like "Fugitive Footsteps" or composing "Elegy and Vision." The latter piece honors Sherr's brother who passed away at an early age, but the music "conveys a sense of resolution and hope" for anyone that has suffered a profound loss. Most recently Sherr composed "Flame Language," another piece based on a poem by Sachs about the Holocaust.

Whether they're addressing health issues, international struggles or social tragedies, these artists and arts organizations strive to use their gifts to affect society's senses and open minds. History has shown that socially conscious art has the power to highlight issues and viewpoints that are often ignored. It seems only natural that the artists of both yesterday and today embrace the power of art—and choose to use that power to change our world for the better.

A Holocaust Commemoration

Presented by the
KSU College of the Arts



Laurence Sherr (above) is often asked to speak at Holocaust commemorations featuring his compositions.

Photo by Elizabeth Williams