

Contemporary art hits the road

by Dagny C. Ernest



Diana Cherbuliez's "Waiting for You" had its origins under the artist's bed.

Why is it that people feel perfectly comfortable going to a concert and deciding whether or not they like the music, but think they have to "know something" about art in order to visit a gallery of museum?

This tendency is particularly evident when it comes to contemporary art ... which means the Maine Center for Contemporary Art in Rockport has a built-in challenge when it comes to getting people through its doors and into its galleries. So CMCA is meeting that challenge by bringing its art directly to people of all ages, all around the state.

Painter Cathy Melio of Stockton Springs, CMCA's education director, will bring her Fear No Art slide and discussion presentation to Waterfalls Arts Belfast Monday evening, Feb. 25, as part of its monthly Artists Lecture Series. Melio, known to WERU listeners as longtime host of "Off the Cuff," came up with the art road show idea a couple of years ago and a grant by the National Endowment of the Arts made the idea a reality.

"We really wanted to do some kind of an outreach. We are a statewide organization and needed a way to let people know what we do ... and also demonstrate that contemporary art is accessible," said Melio.

The program's name was inspired by the logo that appears on T-shirts and aprons in the CMCA shop.

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Friendship artist Sam Cady will present his work during Monday night's Fear No Art show. Pictured is his painting "Sloop Restoration 2."

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It's tongue-in-cheek, Melio said, but she thinks there really is some fear to overcome.

"I'll ask for hands — who here fears art? And there always are some. I ask what they fear, and often they say, that they don't know enough to appreciate contemporary art," Melio said.

One of the tour's largest audiences, elementary school children, seem exempted from that trepidation. Melio likened showing slides of contemporary art to schoolchildren all around the state to attending a fireworks display: as each slide clicks into place, there is a chorus of sincere

"oohs" and "aahs."

Last year, Melio or one of her assistants presented Fear No Art to nine schools, including Watershed Community and South schools in Rockland, Camden-Rockport Middle School and Belfast's Captain Albert Stevens School. When working with children, Melio employs Philip Yenawine's Visual Thinking Strategy, a way of sharing a subject that brings forth discussion and empowerment on the part of audience members rather than just expecting them to be receptors of information.

"I don't give top-down information, but rather ask questions to draw the kids out and drive them to mine the images themselves," Melio explained.

As a slide is projected, Melio will ask the children, "What is going on here?" and "What else

can we find?" She encourages them to realize they can each have a different impression of art ... and that all are correct.

"Teachers often tell me the children who have a lot to say are kids who kids who don't usually speak in class. I think it [VTS] helps them to feel heard. And it's so much fun! I end up saying, wow, I never saw that in there before," enthused Melio.

Many of the children with whom Melio works live miles from CMCA or any other place they might experience contemporary art. One component of Fear No Art is that every participant gets a pair of free passes to CMCA; Melio said the passes are marked as to where they were issued and it is surprising how many people end up visiting from all over the state.

"A lot of the places we go,

people are living below the poverty line. We're bringing art to kids and people who don't have easy access to it," she said.

The children as a whole seem to be very much at ease with the work Melio presents. Fear No Art offers a range of art from traditional media and craft to installation and performance art. One piece has proven very popular: "Waiting for You" by Vinahaven's Diana Cherbuliez is the figure of a reclining woman made out of dust collected from under the artist's bed for one year. Another, from a recent new media show, depicts Nathan Stevens' "Beware of Dog" installation, which had video of the artist barking, quite believably, like a dog.

"The kids just love that one," said Melio.

They also enjoy learning that artists live in their midst. At many Fear No Art presentations, Melio is accompanied by a local con-

temporary artist, who shows and talks about his or her work. Monday night, Sam Cady of Friendship will be on hand. Cady is known nationally for his shaped canvasses and a technique of isolating his subjects in almost sculptural, yet two-dimensional, shapes that result in painted images that move between the extremes of photorealism and abstraction. Cady's work is in the collections of Farnsworth Art Museum, Portland Museum of Art, Peabody Essex Museum, the Decordova Museum and in many private and corporate collections. He teaches in the master of fine arts Program at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

Maine is filled with such renowned active artists, yet when Melio visits art classrooms, she always sees the same posters of works by Picasso or Van Gogh. That observation led to another CMCA art outreach that will begin this spring. With support of Camden National Bank and the Mudge Foundation, Melio is developing curriculum materials and a poster series that will put contemporary Maine artists front and center in school art classrooms.

Schools were the target sites when the Fear No Art program debuted in 2006, but Melio kept hearing from teachers that grownups would enjoy the program too. So she contacted libraries and began bringing Fear No Art to that setting, which has led to presentations to community service clubs, senior colleges, civic organizations and confer-

ences including last fall's At the Creative Center statewide teachers conference at the Samoset.

The natural beauty of Maine so informs its art that Melio developed a second slide/discussion series called Maine is a Garden, which she presents to garden clubs. And last fall's very successful Altered Book Project, a collaboration of CMCA and the Camden and Rockport libraries, has led to an Altered Book program as well. In all, Melio and colleagues made 30 presentations all around the state last year. Coming up on this year's schedule is a March program at Camden's Quarry Hill and one at the State House in Augusta for legislators.

Since 2006, Melio said some 1,700 people have seen the slide talk. The content of Fear No Art, which runs about 45 minutes, changes to include selections from ongoing shows and features examples from past CMCA shows, including the 2006 "Maine Print Project."

"I never get tired of it, because we keep changing images," said Melio.

Fear No Art will be presented 7 p.m. Monday, Feb. 25, at Waterfalls Arts Belfast, 256 High St. While the CMCA program is free, Waterfalls Arts asks for a suggested \$5 donation for its Artists Lecture Series. Everyone who attends the lecture will receive a free pair of guest passes to visit CMCA during the coming year.

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