

Business, art a happy merger

COMPANIES GET SERIOUS ABOUT EXHIBITIONS



The Arts Board show includes innovative craft work, such as James and Renee Neilsen Engebretson's blown and sand-carved "Jagged Edge Glass Bowl."

By Kevin Lynch
The Capital Times

The mold in Andre Ferrella's art is tiny, microscopic stuff. It's beautiful and a tad creepy. With a gleam his eye, Ferrella calls it "living art," but it reflects how cutting-edge biochemistry is about more than cutting genes apart or making clones.

Ferrella's new photography exhibit at the Promega Corp. also signifies how the pharmaceutical research company has taken a new step: actually staging serious art exhibits. They're even identifying with this work, with a 1997 company calendar featuring Ferrella's microbe art.

Then there's "big" stuff, meetings of powerful forces in cultural and business groups. One result is Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce hosting the 1997 Wisconsin Arts Board's Visual and Media Arts Fellowship Awards Exhibit. The 47-piece exhibit is at 501 E. Washington Ave., in the conference center of the state's largest business association.

Such are the factors at play in increasingly proactive roles for business in art.

There's nothing token about these efforts. The impressive Arts Board show of Wisconsin artists includes work by Tom Bamberger, Randall Berendt, Bert Brouwer, Barry Carlsen, James Engebretson, John William Ford, Todd McGrain, Nancy Mladenoff, J.J. Murphy and Andreas Rosas.

The Arts Board show, which opened in January, will have a public reception for the artists from 4 to 6 p.m. today.

The reception will serve as a finale to the Arts Day 97, a statewide celebration of the arts in Madison.

This show continues in Madison only through Friday, but then the association is assisting a state tour of the

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Pat Blankenburg of Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce inspects works at the trade association's exhibit of Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowship winners, including Bert Brouwer's painting "Life as a Delicate Balancing Act" (foreground).

HENRY A. KOSHOLLEK/THE CAPITAL TIMES



RICH RYGH/THE CAPITAL TIMES

Madison artist Andre Ferrella's mold-enhanced photography is on display at Promega Corp. through May 30.

'Living Art' photos exquisitely textured

By Kevin Lynch
The Capital Times

You see an Egyptian mummy come to life and you might cry "Help!"

One mummy did. Help, that is. In return for artist Andre Ferrella following his intuition, the mummy came to life, as it were, if not quite as it once was. And just like that, Ferrella had an extraordinary work of art. Sufficiently mystified?

See for yourself. Ferrella's 37 "Living Art" photographs are on display at Promega Corp. through May 30.

This tale begins centuries ago, in the land of the pharaohs. But we'll pick it up a few years ago, when Ferrella's accidental art was born.

He had left some undeveloped roles of film in his basement for several years.

Examining the film one day, he discovered that the strips had developed mold, which created the sorts of beautiful texture and form with which nature often blesses us — as with frost, autumnal erosion and other serendipitous chemistry.

Ferrella knew a good thing when he saw it. He started working with nature more consciously and developed his distinctive photo style.

His new art show, "Living Art," is a collection of exquisitely textured photos, most of which are abstract in design but which incorporate specific objects or scenes. As Ferrella describes it: "I use the photographic medium as minute ecosystems to reveal the evolution

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show to Eau Claire, Milwaukee, Green Bay, Manitowoc and White-water.

Such efforts mark a new direction for proactive cultural involvement by the business sector.

In recent times, corporations typically collected art piecemeal as decor, an admirable if somewhat self-serving public relations practice.

This new activity is going one or two steps further.

Corporations often sponsor arts events at performance venues. But these exhibits represent business people identifying more closely with serious visual art on their own premises. It signifies a different kind of bottom line, a long-term view of how their presence adds up to benefit contemporary culture and society.

"Now there are new ways for industry to support arts, to show the rest of the world where we're going," says Daniel Swadener, the art consultant who organizes Promega's collecting and exhibition efforts.

Andre Ferrella's photography exhibit, "Living Art," opened to the public this week and runs through May 30 at Promega's futuristic BioPharmaceutical Technology Center, 5445 E. Cheryl Parkway (off Fish Hatchery Road). The show is open to the public from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. or by appointment (see accompanying story).

Of course, there's a self-serving angle — the art is created with a biochemical process, and exhibited to perhaps symbolize the creative energy of the corporation itself, which does research for the production of pharmaceuticals.

But whatever the public relations motives, these shows stand up on their own artistic merits. And Promega is planning to do art exhibits periodically, Swadener says.

A previous Promega show by African artist Francis Nnagendda has since toured to Indiana University and Kent State University. Swadener is also preparing a collection of 130 East African artworks to be exhibited at Promega next year.

There's been a close relationship between companies and art going back to the old guild movement, says Pat Blankenburg, government relations project coordinator for Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce.

In 1992, the association had its first art exhibit of the best art from state corporate collections.

"This was very desirable for them to be near the State Capitol and associated with a statewide effort," Blankenburg says.

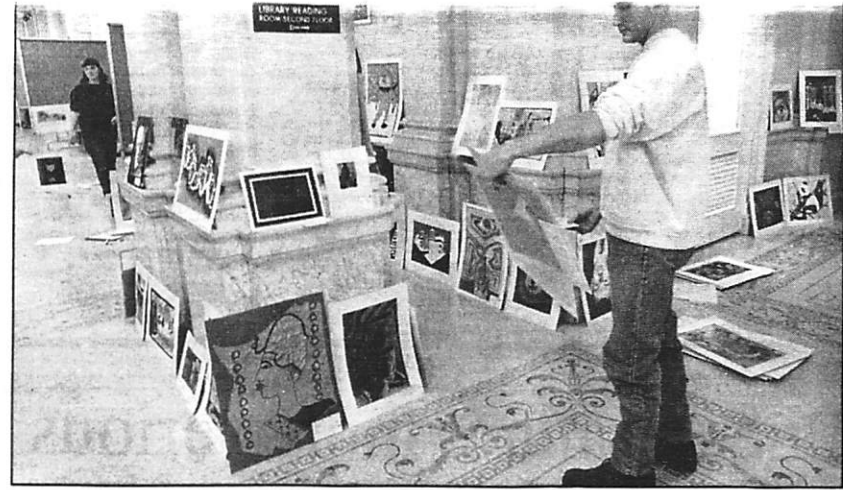
Ferrella

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of life.

"I've discovered this work shows me the organic quality of life on an artistic level. I also have a science background, and the merging of those two disciplines has been a challenge. There's always been a gap between the two, and this work brings those two sectors of the world together. After all, photography is both a science and an art."

Ferrella's work is already in collections in the United States and Europe, where the Madison artist recently represented the United States at the 50th anniversary of the Amerika Haus (the exhibition and information center devoted to American culture and government).



DAVID SANDELL/THE CAPITAL TIMES

□ Kent Tollakson helps hang 300 pieces of art that are part of a special show commemorating Youth Art Month. The exhibit hangs through March 29 in the headquarters of the State Historical Society, 816 State St. (across from the UW Memorial Library). The reception and awards ceremony will be Friday from 7 to 9 p.m. For information, call 264-6400.

"The collaboration with the Arts Board came about because we thought this was a way to do this more easily — take those winners and make another showcase."

"It's important to recognize that companies do things in their local community. Arts Board grants often go to communities where companies are active in arts. They may know the artists because company representatives are on arts boards, so there's a connection between businesses and the arts and that's growing every day."

"It's a realization that art is not just a tangential part of your life, whether it's in the street or in a gallery."

It helps that WMC President James Haney is active in arts organizations such as American Players Theatre and the Wisconsin Foundation for the Arts.

"I think many Wisconsin companies are heavily invested in cultural activities," Haney says. "As a trade association, we try to promote the best practices, to lobby the Legislature and educate employers as to what is the best in employment policy or day care, and support to the arts."

"So it's a natural to showcase our art, and plant the seed for other companies."

Blankenburg feels that opportunities are growing for collaboration between artists and businesses: "all sorts of in-kind projects to look for opportunities for artists."

"The Kohler Co. is the extreme example, where artists actually go into the company's facilities to produce art. But companies can produce fliers for arts organizations and get credit lines, and other things."

Blankenburg sees the emergence of the Wisconsin Assembly of Local Arts Agencies as important.

Formed last year, the group is designed to bring arts groups and businesses together to brainstorm, strategize and collaborate.

"It's important to connect grass-roots arts people with the larger community," says Anne Katz, director of the assembly. "It also takes the movers and shakers. You can't have one without the other."

"We need cooperation and partnership to be able to do great things. That's our primary mission as we head into the 21st century."

The millennium also marks a new level of governmental austerity regarding culture at the state and national levels. However, government policies still tend toward so-called "corporate welfare" — tax systems that facilitate profit margins. Consequently, socially responsible corporations may need to pick up the slack in arts funding.

The Arts Board show reflects that agency's new strategies, after being compelled by the Legislature to find alternatives to state funding for its projects.

"There's a lot of political pressure to downsize funding contributions to the arts, but I think ultimately arts are part of everything we do," says Swadener.

"Corporations have had more of a tradition of support than government support. There always were rich people who supported the arts."

"Now it's tricky. The support for the arts is dictated by legislation, and that's the first budget portion that gets cut. I think more corporations think of art as serious art, not just as commercial, to find the value of it somewhere down the line."

"The numbers have to add up, but we've had some real good press and reactions when we promote art without thinking about the bottom line. That's exposure you can't buy," Swadener says.

Though WMC's Haney questions whether corporate welfare exists, he feels that "most employers are pretty good citizens."

"Our trade members are people who are heavily invested in their communities, whether it's education reform, the arts, or whatever. As a trade association, we should tell how they do that. We should celebrate that and invest in the quality-of-life things that make Wisconsin so special."

His most remarkable "living art" piece is "Encrypture," which is a strange little tale in itself.

Several years ago, Ferrella was at the Tate Gallery in London photographing an Egyptian sarcophagus. He zeroed in on the decorative textiles that have encased the mummy for centuries.

Later, when he allowed the photos to acquire the "living art" mold, he realized that something happened with three consecutive negatives from the casket shots.

The mold stretched horizontally across three frames to delineate a tall, tapering form. It looks like nothing but the dark, ghostly presence of a mummy, replete with tapered garment edges and the sloping shoulders of a wrapped human figure.

Half hidden in darkness and surrounded by bright, floating "ectoplasmic" particles, the 18-foot-tall "Encrypture" is a magnificent nightmare.

The work brings to mind the

evocative documentary power of the "Shroud of Turin" (long believed to be the burial cloth of Jesus Christ), which is about the same length as this photomontage.

In another Ferrella photo, the camera eye gazes up at the Brooklyn Bridge, as a small child might while standing on the bridge. In the foreground, the mold has created what looks like a frame and lens from eyeglasses. The effect suggests a lifelong memory that has grown more wondrous as it erodes with time.

Other more abstract works use light to stunning effect, as in "The Third Observed," which gives a viewer the feeling of standing inside a cave with a golden, redemptive light glowing on the outside.

There's an old artist's bromide that says that you cannot outdo nature. Ferrella shows how well a good artist can enhance nature, and perhaps even unlock a mystery or two.

See for yourself.

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