



Blockage at The Artery

Eureka council debates future of public art project.

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Eureka Springs, that city of contrasts, is at it again. This time, the debate is over The Artery, the public art project directed by Charlotte Buchanan in the city parking lot on First Street downtown.

The Artery project, which started in 2005, is an exhibit of 27 4-by-8-foot murals on concrete panels lining the back of the lot, covering a retaining wall. The work is for sale; proceeds are shared by the artists and a non-profit fund for artist education.

Buchanan, who also started the Sunday Market, the Lucky 13 Cinema outdoor movie series and other special events in Eureka, got a letter from Mayor Dani Joy in February saying she would have to enter into a contract with the city to continue to operate the Artery. To date The Artery has operated under what Buchanan calls a “gentlewoman's agreement” between the project and the Eureka Springs Historic District Commission.

Joy complained that one of the panels was deteriorating and the exhibit had not changed since 2007. Buchanan acknowledged that one of the panels hadn't been properly sealed and was deteriorating.

But there were earlier signs of bad blood being caused by The Artery, whose theme this year is “Icon.” Elizabeth Wolf's painting of Hillary Clinton (“It Takes a Village”) was defaced, and one merchant in town took issue that Clinton would be worthy of inclusion.

At a City Council meeting last month, according to a report in the Lovely County Citizen newspaper, a resident complained that “innocent children and unsuspecting adults” were being exposed to nudity — specifically Michelle Levy's satirical painting of a Madonna (“Does This Halo Make My Face Look Fat?”) breast-feeding an infant. Another, Beth Post's “The Temptation of Alice,” which includes a “Drag-Queen of Hearts” in a cape and bikini underwear, had raised a few hackles in the community of 2,000-plus, in which Christian fundamentalists and lefties famously rub shoulders, sometimes the wrong way.

Buchanan and the city have not been able to come up with a contract that is satisfactory to both; if they can, it will be presented to the City Council at its meeting June 8.

Last week, Mayor Joy, who said the Municipal League has advised her against any kind of contract, appointed a six-person Arts Council to recommend ways to promote the arts through the city's advertising and promotion commission. She'd like to see the Arts Council call the shots on public art; members include gallery owners and artists in the community; Buchanan, a former alderman, was not appointed. One member, Zeek Taylor, has exhibited in The Artery.

Now, Buchanan invites artists from all over the state to provide work along the lines of a theme. There is no jurying; Buchanan said that would stifle creativity and open the door to censorship. Congressional District Programs, a non-governmental non-profit that administers separate funds in the way a community foundation works, keeps the books.

Buchanan said that 30 panels have sold since The Artery's inception; prices range between \$800 and \$8,000. The funds have been used to stage successive exhibits. Buchanan has invited artists to create work for a 2009 show slated to go up Aug. 30 for the Labor Day Weekend. The theme is “Seasons.” Buchanan said that was unlikely to provoke controversial subject matter.

The Little Rock Film Festival beat New York City to the punch May 15 when it screened “Herb and Dorothy,” a documentary film about a couple of New Yorkers of modest means who amassed a huge collection of minimalist and other contemporary artworks. The couple, he a postman and she a librarian, getting on in years and about to be swallowed up by the work in their small, rent-controlled apartment, donated their collection to the National Gallery of Art. They could have sold it for millions, but as retired government employees they wanted to give the work to the public.

Fortunately for the Arkansas Arts Center, the Vogel collection is too large for the National Gallery to handle it all. It will receive works from the collection as part of the National Gallery's Fifty Works for Fifty States project that is sending art to public institutions nationwide, including the 1970 watercolor by abstract impressionist painter Robert Duran accompanying this column.

Other artists represented in the Arts Center's collection include William Anastasi, Will Barnet, Robert Barry, Lynda Benglis, Michael Vinson, Charles Clough, Richard Francisco, Charles Gaines, Michael Goldberg, Jene Highstein, Martin Johnson, Steve Keister, Mark Kostabi, Cheryl Laemmie, Michael Lucero, Robert Mangold, Richard Nonas, Betty Parsons, Lucio Pozzi, Edda Renouf, Daryl Trivieri and Richard Tuttle.

The Argenta Downtown Council will launch the Argenta Arts and Crafts Market at 501 Main St. on May 30 and is looking for vendors, who'll get booth space for free on opening day.

The market will be open on Saturdays and Tuesdays from 7 am. To 1 p.m. through October, coinciding with the Farmers Market.

For more information, go to www.argentaart.com or call Nicole Young at 563-5634.

For more art news go to arkansasartnotes.tumblr.com.



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