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AVAM exhibit celebrates the rugged individualist



"Flight School" by Athlone Clarke, (paint and mixed media collage of found objects) (Courtesy of the artist, Photo: Dan Meyers)

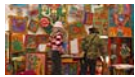
By Tim Smith | tim.smith@baltsun.com
Baltimore Sun reporter
October 1, 2009

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"It's going to be a challenge for a lot of people," says Roger Manley, gesturing to the invigoratingly eclectic collection of material he curated for the **American Visionary Art Museum's** new exhibit, "Life, Liberty & the Pursuit of Happiness." "It's a little tougher show than some of the previous ones."

The museum is famed for its focus on artists who lack formal training but are loaded with motivation and imagination. This show celebrates that concept of rugged individualism in a big, involving way.

"For the first time in history, a country was founded where the emphasis was put on individual people doing what they felt was right," Manley says. "[Displaying] art by eccentric people is an entirely appropriate way to look at how and why America was founded."

Commanding attention on one wall is a piece constructed of metal, paint, rope and carpet by Alabama-based Thornton Dial Sr. called "Eve and Adam Still Waiting for **Christmas**." Within the huge,

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abstract creation are forms that suggest red, white and blue Christmas trees, a totally individualistic splash of Americana that finds a counterpoint in a large evocation of the **Statue of Liberty** created out of driftwood by a severely arthritic former carpenter in Louisiana named Adam Morales.

The use of written language crops up in several objects in the exhibit, nowhere more forcefully than on dozens of signs that line the entrance hall of the museum. They contain angry, block-lettered messages made over many years by Missourian Jesse Howard, protesting one slight after another by neighbors and governments.

"He was one of the all-time great cranks," Manley says. "His work is one of the best examples of free speech run amok. This tells people right away that there will be some strange stuff in this show."

Strange, and potentially controversial.

Among the most provocative items are by Suleiman al-Nadhi, Detainee No. 511 at Guantanamo, where he was sent after his arrest more than seven years ago in Afghanistan. His decoratively designed thank-you notes were made for his Atlanta-based lawyers. "As far as I know, this is the only art to come out of Guantanamo," Manley says.

There are several large paintings by Ala Bashir, **Saddam Hussein's** personal physician. The darkly vivid "Journey" shows a nearly skeletal figure with a ravenlike bird against a forbidding, desolate landscape.

Other pieces in the exhibit confront contemporary issues in bold style, among them Jim Bloom's "Abu Ghraib Saturday Night" and "Go Back to Gay Town," with their bold lines and bold colors conveying the rawness of hate and violence.

Issues of civil rights are raised repeatedly in the exhibit, from Japanese-American internment camps to racial struggles in the South.

There are lighter elements, too, including the startling creations of Texas-born Richard McMahan, who has painstakingly re-created, in miniature, thousands of art masterpieces he has seen in old magazines or library books. A plentiful sampling is displayed in a wall-full of doll house-size cases. "A museum within a museum is fun to see," Manley says.

There's New Jersey-born illustrator Renaldo Kuhler, who created his own imaginary country called Rocaterrania, tucked between the border of New York and Canada, and has produced a huge quantity of works revealing its Eastern European-looking residents, buildings and language.

Georgia Blizzard, a chronically poor woman of Irish and Apache descent, taught herself to make clay pottery without a potter's wheel. Her remarkably accomplished works contain what Manley describes as "tragic expressions of her life."

There are quilts by undocumented workers in California, showing very different worlds and the often cruel border in between, and a huge, exceedingly intricate and eventful hieroglyphic-style drawing by Frenchman Jean-Pierre Nadau that takes the viewer on a journey from Manhattan to **Long Island** and back again (and finds the "Vampire State Building" on the return).

The late New Yorker Dick Lubinsky, a schizophrenic and hoarder, is revealed to have been a superb craftsman who produced distinctive drawings with considerable emotional content. Paintings by playwright **Clifford Odets**, in their first-ever museum outing, open another window into his creative energy. Andrew Romanov, the California-based grandnephew of Czar Nicholas II, is represented by "Shrinky Dink" art - childlike drawings on clear plastic sheets that shrink when baked.

Back on the controversial side are works by several prisoners in U.S. jails, most impressively the detailed, wistful Americana of Vincent Nardone, serving a life sentence for a crime committed in Maryland more than 30 years ago.

"There is very little here of art that is meant to experiment with color or say something about how light looks on someone's face," Manley says. "This is art about making a difference, about improving things. It's what I call art that matters."

If you go

"Life, Liberty & the Pursuit of Happiness" opens Saturday and runs through Sept. 5, 2010. Admission is \$8 to \$14

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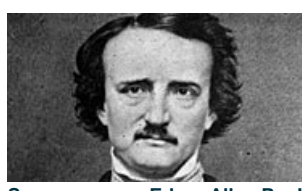
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