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Artists' exhibit a plea for more media coverage

BY KRISTINA TEDESCHI STAFF WRITER

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Is arts coverage in the Pioneer Valley a shadow of what it used to be?

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It's a question that a group of artists are tackling in "Cover Me," an exhibit at the Hampden Gallery at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

The idea for the show was born last April, when Holyoke artist Mo Ringey posted an entry on her blog, "Art & About with Mo," bemoaning the fact that local newspapers just weren't covering the arts like they used to.

"Support for the arts is becoming more and more scant in this community. Like the moon," Ringey wrote, "it is waning quickly."

"What if we all tried really hard to convince the local papers to cover art again?" Ringey wondered. She proposed having a group show about the lack of arts coverage. Ringey is well-known in the Pioneer Valley for her tempered glass-covered artwork. Her mosaic pieces, which often incorporate vintage home appliances like televisions and refrigerators, have been exhibited widely in the area.

The day after the post appeared on Ringey's blog, Anne LaPrade, director of Hampden Gallery at UMass, responded to her query by urging her to organize a show.

"All I can say is - if the interest is there - we've got the venue," LaPrade wrote on Ringey's blog.

Now, 10 months later, "Cover Me," a collection of work that tackles what the dozen artists in the show say is spotty arts coverage in the local press is on view at the Hampden Gallery through

Tuesday. And with a title as demanding as this one, the show begs to be, well - covered.

But it also begs the question: Why is it important to artists that their work makes it into the pages of a newspaper?

"From my point of view, I think it's just important that people know what you're doing," Ringey said in a recent telephone interview. "It feels more successful if a lot of people look at it."

It helps a lot, too, when you can include press clippings with grant or exhibition applications, she says.

"It almost validates your work," said Ringey, who curated the show.

Ringey handpicked the artists in the show based on their reputations for bringing specific topics to the fore in their previous work, she said - or, as she puts it, "people not necessarily painting the next fruit bowl."

"Cover Me" includes work in several mediums, from a video with sound installation to graphite and charcoal on paper to soap. While each work addresses the press's role in covering the arts, some pieces make more pointed references than others.

In Brooklyn-based artist Jon Whitney's "Freedumb," a photographic C-print - a color or monochrome print made on negative-type color or monochrome photographic paper - two shotguns are pictured one above the other. One is pink, while the other is blue, representing what Whitney says, in written comments accompanying the piece, are newspapers' tendency to cover violence, sex, and the "war" between the sexes.

"Pointing out what is covered demonstrates what is not covered," he writes.

A free-standing installation by Cummington resident Larry Slezak, called "News, Weather and Sports," looks like a four-sided window, forming a kind of square, transparent-walled chamber. Piled on top of the chamber's black-and-white checkered floor is a tall, wild tangle of barbed wire. The window frames are covered with old issues of a Springfield newspaper. The accompanying text explains that newspapers are quick to cover the basics, like weather, news and sports, but are less apt to write about the arts.

"When the soul of the arts is tortured," Slezak writes, "we all suffer."

The silence of the small gallery is punctuated by a video installation by Brooklyn artist Carey Ascenzo. Over a backdrop of footage from the 1976 film "All the President's Men," which stars Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman as investigative reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, who uncovered the Watergate scandal while with the Washington Post, Ascenzo superimposes the faces of several people who were all asked to say the same thing: "Let's put this baby to bed!" The saying comes from a term commonly used to indicate a newspaper is ready for the next day's publication.

The lively debate that the exhibit, and its title, have sparked has been interesting, Ringey says. At the exhibit's opening reception at the beginning of the month, she said, "people kept saying, you've gotten really good coverage in the past, what's your problem?"

"I had to keep explaining, it's not always about me, it's about other people," said Ringey.

Other artists in the show are: Line Bruntse of Lancaster, Pa.; Ian Burns of Brooklyn, N.Y.; Mike Karmody of Florence; Greg Kline of Leverett; Holly Murray of Wilbraham; Lisa Scollan of Northampton; Maggie Nowinski of Easthampton; and Anila Zaidi of Ludlow.

"Cover Me" is on display at the Hampden Gallery in the Southwest Residential Area at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst through Tuesday. Hours are Mondays through Thursdays from noon to 6 p.m. and Sundays from 2 to 5 p.m. For more information, visit

umass.edu/fac/hampden/ or call 545-3394.

Kristina Tedeschi can be reached at ktedeschi@gazettenet.com.

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