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JUN 04 2012 **Exhibition Opening Exudes the Joy in Art @ Tory Folliard**

Lon Michels Exhibits Personal Vision of da Vinci's Masterpiece

Posted at 12:55 PM

Posted By: **Peggy Sue**

In Section: **Art Talk**

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To enter Tory Folliard Gallery Saturday evening was to experience an explosion of color that washed over one's emotions into pure joy. Wisconsin painter Lon Michels came to Milwaukee for the premiere of his documentary film *The Last Supper* on the set at Next Act Theatre and then celebrated the unveiling of his grand scale painting with the same name at the Tory Folliard Gallery exhibition "Life Lived Large."

Michels and his partner Todd, travel together everywhere with their new puppy, Bises, both standing by his side on Saturday evening. The new exhibition culminated three years of work that mirrored the second act on stage at the Skylight Music Theatre several blocks away in the Third Ward's Broadway Theatre Center. A story where an artist named George, named after a distant prestigious grandfather, celebrates his own art opening in the James Lapine/Stephen Sondheim award winning musical *Sunday in the Park With George*. The musical fictionally confronts the delicate balance between creating, making, and selling art in its homage to pointillist painter Georges Seurat, and his painting *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jette*.

"Life Lived Large" pays homage to several other old masters, most notably Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Yet, alongside Michels's massive paintings are small images reflecting his further inspirations: Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and Édouard Manet's *Olympia* and *The Luncheon on the Grass*, or *The Bathers*. Van Gogh receives his due, reflected in the purple iris groves tucked into corners of paintings where one white iris stands alone, a tribute to the Christ. And Henri Matisse's work lives on in those interior scenes and portraits where tiny representations of Matisse's images can be recognized within several of Michels's ornate scenes. Which can resemble contemporary acrylic altar panels, including his painting titled *The Magi*.

Indeed, Michels continually honors art history, and also researched his own *The Last Supper* before embarking on this personal journey to reassemble da Vinci's stunning masterpiece. Michels and Todd traveled to Jerusalem and visited the room where Jesus supposedly held that final meal with his betrayer and friends. The artist questioned travel guides, lay in Christ's tomb and extensively discussed the circumstances of this event with those he encountered in Israel, the promised land that reverberates with what Michels describes as "his palpable spiritual energy." During this process, Michels discovered 40 or 50 people actively followed Jesus, including women, and so Michels's version depicts women dining with the twelve.

Since Michels captures 'real people' throughout his work, and resists working from photographs, all the apostles and disciples pictured in the painting are people from Michels's life. A likeness of a favorite professor sits to the right of Jesus in the portrait, the tires from his wheelchair show as faint circles in the painting's foreground while other relatives and friends important to Michels surround him. Every minute detail in the painting notes Michels's attention to symbolism and the gallery provides a guide for these references if there's an interest.

Perched in a chair across the room Saturday evening, one viewed the people observing this colorfully patterned and extravagant *The Last Supper*. Individuals who were portrayed in the painting stood by their counterpart to have their photo snapped. Two men, partners in life, stood in front of the painting and then passionately kissed. Others moved to within an inch of the canvas, scrutinizing the finely detailed work, admiring the meticulous brushstrokes. When one realizes Michels paints freehand, without any drawing underneath or reference points for the painting, these details reflect miraculous marks in color, because a rose appears in every square on this grand scale canvas.

Simultaneously in another area of the gallery, art patrons lined up in front of a painted chair where a modern "prince charming" donned a leopard print sleeveless t-shirt. Sit in the

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Russ Bickerstaff: I am genuinely sorry to have offended you.

upholstered armchair, and the prince would fit the parton with a shoe Michels had ornamented and signed, a treasure to carry home that was also captured on film for exhibition performance art. Others hovered in the gallery to admire the vintage furs Michels painted and named to remember past film personalities: Marlene Dietrich, Grace Kelly and Marilyn Monroe. Hung on two other walls were reclaimed deer heads and cow skulls, covered in vibrant patterns resembling ancient mosaics.

The evening infused joy to those whose attended, igniting the artistic soul, and all born from enormous pain in the artist's life. Michels's documentary explains Lon's hands bear the consequences of his mother taking Thalidomide before he was born so his knuckles became crooked, grown into slight deformities. Michels covers each one with large rings. He lost his sight in his 40's, and then it miraculously returned two years later. Another dusky day on Key West, Michels built a rock tower in 40 mile an hour winds and believed through faith it would stand, something he shared with his partner Todd. When he returned three days later, 16 more appeared on the shore and stood in its shadow, and he had a sign their relationship would be permanent.

Michels's life and paintings illustrate miracles happen every day, and they happen to every one who keeps an eye open for them to appear. And then instructs one to keep their eyes open to the sensuous world around them for what occurs in their life. Michels said everyone in his *The Last Supper* is "unaware of the miracles happening before them."

The Last Supper also collects people of all cultures, ethnicities, gender, sexual persuasions, politics and skin color around the table in front of the Christ, visions of harmony and peace, that shows blood dripping from Christ's body over a miniature world He holds in his hands. A painting that reflects love from every dimension and among the individuals seated in this upper room. Lon Michels insists "being in love is an act of faith, and a universal language like the painting itself."

Folliard's exhibition of "Lon Michels: Life Lived Large" breathes these words of love with intensity from an extravagant life to extravagant art. Michels has completed over 1800 objects, paintings and sculptures beginning from when he was eight years old. This work from his last three years encompasses unabashed pain that flourished into faith, happiness and joy along with a search for something greater than the artist alone. Finishing the painting and placing in the exhibition demonstrates his steadfast belief in dedication and Winston Churchill's motto, "Never ever, ever, ever, ever give up."

The exhibition in essence pictures a second chance at life Michels shares with all those he meets, in person and through a canvas, fur coat or a simple shoe. Explore Michels through his paintings with their explosion of color and emotion. Be amazed by his creative dedication that in its completion exudes joy. Study *The Last Supper* and possibly discover a personal awakening to a spiritual connection. Perhaps viewing this painting might portray an alternate vision of heaven itself.

Tory Folliard Gallery presents "Lon Michels: Life Lived Large" through June 30. Another exhibition follows at Madison's James Watrous Gallery beginning July 6 and includes a surprise performance event for the July 7 opening during the 2:00-6:00 p.m. reception, with a gallery talk at 3:00 p.m. Another viewing of the documentary will be available. For more information: www.toryfolliard.com or www.wisconsinacademy.org/gallery.

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anonymous: This is so stupid. \$500 is not a bribe, its a donation. Really there ...

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-Jusme:
Dr Kidare: You could only wish you were him. I do see that you so ...

-Dr Kidare:
@Jusme
Could you give it a rest for just one minute? It's a\$\$holes like you on BOTH ...

-Jusme:
He is not the Anti-Christ he is one of it's deciples. The Anti Christ is the ...

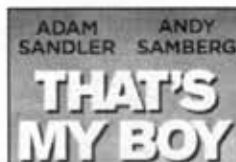
Hosey: what no story on the recall? I bet there is one but it was only ...

anonymous: We win!!!! Now Charles Darwin is in charge. Oh, sorry for the mix up, ...

anonymous: Divide and Conquer!!! The Democrats have been made fools of. It was a total Republican ...

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