



VISUALART | REVIEW

Michels Living 'Large' at Folliard Gallery

BY JUDITH ANN MORIARTY

"Life Lived Large," through June 30 at Tory Folliard Gallery in the Third Ward, features a feast of paintings and sculptures by Wisconsin's Lon Michels, who arrived June 2, supported by a pre-exhibition documentary film detailing his search for spirituality. Then came the gallery reception and, yes, an "Afterglow" party at Club Charlies.

I was about to encounter fireworks ignited by a Liberace-style showman from Lodi, educated with an MFA from UW-Madison. My final moment of serenity occurred when I paused outside of the gallery door to admire an elegant untitled work by Mark Mulhern, a minimalist—the exact opposite of Michels.

Inside, I discovered my favorite local modernist painter, Richard Knight (a former Folliard employee and friend of Michels), imagined as a blue-faced disciple in *The Last Supper*, an enormous and obsessively rendered painting in which Michels' partner, Todd, is disguised in acrylic as both Jesus and Judas. The artist, a former model for Calvin Klein, lets it all hang out in this wonderland of deer heads mounted and painted to the max, vintage furs jeweled (Swarovski!), painted and draped on wild mannequins, and more and more paintings of diverse sizes and shapes, each vying to upstage the others. A master of the bodacious, two years ago he



arrived at the gallery in a limo with 14 women swaddled in vintage furs.

The official artist for the 2012 AIDS Walk Wisconsin, Michels references art history. For example, he created an updated version of Manet's 1863 *Luncheon on the Grass*. Personally, however, his life has not been a picnic. He's a survivor of HIV and for nearly two years was blind due to a retinal disease. His father and grandfather were stonemasons. His back story is complex, but it's clear that his life's building blocks are patterned in paint, laden with symbolism and cemented with bitter and sweet.

I studied a pair of gorgeous landscapes, *View of Okee* and *Cemetery View*. If the point of his life is a quest for spirituality, he needn't look elsewhere.

(top) Lon Michels, *The Last Supper*, Acrylic on Canvas, (bottom) Lon Michels, *Rose*, Acrylic on Bone, Cow Skull