Photo Copy

From the Navy to the art world, this guy gets it coming and going

October 1, 1998 By Alice Naude

When I grew up in the suburbs of America, there were only two artists,“ painter Copy Berg says. ”One was Walt Disney, and the other was Norman Rockwell." Now a quarter-century from suburbia, Berg has twice made great, er, copy: in 1975, as a Navy ensign discharged for homosexuality and, last spring, as an HIV positive artist on trial in the media for obscenity. And yet, ironically, Rockwell’s photorealism and Disney’s animation remain sentimental influences in Berg’s art, if not his life.

But there was nothing warm and fuzzy about the anti-art flap that Berg sparked last spring at Rutgers University Art Gallery in New Jersey. His works in the main gallery weren’t at issue; what offended were the images hung in a kind of back room as an autobiographical complement to the exhibition. These included a series of nude photographs -- one a portrait of the artist at orgasm -- taken by Berg’s friend Marcus Leatherdale, as well as portraits (clothed) that Berg and his HIV positive then-lover, Paul Nash (who died in 1993), had commissioned to document themselves while in the picture of health. A student who heard about the photographs -- though he did not see the show -- objected and called for the exhibition to be taken down. His rantings in the Rutgers student newspaper kicked off a fierce campus controversy and got the New York City news mills spinning.

“What bothers me about the Rutgers thing,” Berg says, "is that even *The New York Times* called the photographs sadomasochistic. And that’s just not true. They’re nude, but they weren’t designed to be sexually provocative.“ The outraged response was, in fact, at distinct odds with the artist’s intention. ”I think the masturbation photo became so controversial and so central,“ he says, ”because the students who objected don’t see AIDS as relevant to them. I presented masturbation as an alternative to a death sentence. They thought I was just showing off."

The controversy also deflected attention from the paintings and drawings Berg had done since 1986. This work is squarely in the tradition of American Pop Art. Using whimsical lines that bring to mind Saul Steinberg and Paul Klee, he depicts men together, cuddling or relaxing. He also draws a series of more abstract, creaturely characters that have a playful, though sometimes lonely, aspect. “I think partly because they are in bright colors and look cartoonish, people didn’t take them seriously,” Berg says. “But the photographs they could point to and say, ’This bothers me.’”

Berg is used to being the odd man out. In 1975, as a 24-year-old officer, he took the Navy to court

over a dishonorable discharge for homosexuality. A media circus descended on the administrative hearing that led to his ouster. But after years of appeals and a class-action suit settled in 1980, Berg forced the Pentagon to change its policy: Gay men and lesbians still get the boot -- but with an honorable discharge.

The Rutgers protest had no such happy ending. Although the show wasn't taken down, controversy darkened its brightness, and Berg remains visibly distraught. But in lighter moments, he is heartened that art with a capital "A" can still provoke. "When Salvador Dali first showed his paintings of melting clocks, there were riots in the streets of Paris," he says. "Art has not had content for a long time -- it's been abstract and removed from popular dialogue." The paintings, drawings and photographs Berg showed at Rutgers were all done in the decade since his diagnosis, and each one is full of life, flesh and joy. "I felt that message always needs to be conveyed," he says. "You can have a full, rich life, even with HIV." And he, gentle readers, has the photos to prove it.

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