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Exhibit gives 'Evidence' of GLBT youth, graffiti and bodybuilders

By Jen Colletta
PGN Staff Writer

Graffiti, GLBT youth and bodybuilders are subjects that aren't normally addressed in connection with one another, but a new art exhibit at the William Way Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center ties all three together in a unique pictorial presentation.

"Evidence" will run through Feb. 29, with a public opening reception Jan. 11 from 6-8 p.m. at the center, 1315 Spruce St.

The exhibit showcases the work of three local female photographers, whose specific messages combine to give a voice to populations whose words are often muffled by society.

Natalie Hope McDonald will present a series of color shots of graffiti and urban landscapes from around the Philadelphia area, demonstrating the hidden beauty she sees within the street culture of the city.

"Any" is McDonald's only portrait in the show, and the subject's many tattoos illustrate the myriad ways in which Philadelphians express themselves.

"There's something so primal about someone wanting to make his or her own mark in public; it dates back to the cave paintings,"

McDonald said. "But in a time when advertising and promotion tends to dominate our landscapes, it's interesting to me to find evidence people leave behind that's become a part of our city's fabric. To me, neglect isn't a negative concept. It provides undeniable character to a city like Philadelphia."

McDonald, a freelance writer originally from central Pennsylvania, had two photographs featured in an art show at the center two years ago and contacted directors afterwards to pitch the idea of a street-art exhibit, in which she said "Evidence" curator Lauren Griffin immediately took an interest.

Rachelle Lee Smith enlisted the help of GLBT youth for her photography project. Smith captured these youth against a white backdrop to eliminate any "environmental influence," as she put it. After the shots were printed, she met up with her subjects and allowed them to add their own personal touch to the pictures.

"I left it open for them to finish the piece. Together we'd go over a photo and they'd finish it by writing on it an experience, a story, a quote or a song."

Smith began the venture about five years ago.

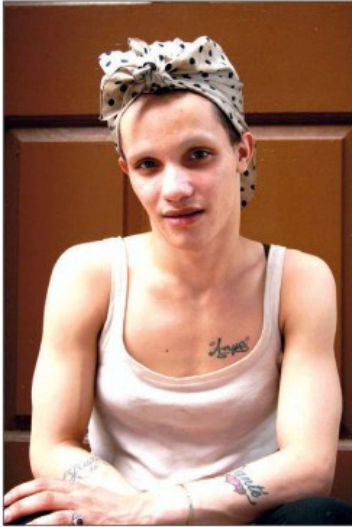
"I started with friends so they could warm up to it and then it expanded through word of mouth and I flired around town and in community centers," she said. "I've caught people who are traveling, too, so there are people from all over the country. I just want to have enough different experiences to share and have people see them."

She hopes to have enough photos to have them bound and printed in a book. Smith, who is openly lesbian, said her motivation for the project stems from her own experiences of listening to the stories and experiences of other GLBT young adults as she was growing up.

"In high school I was always accepted, but when I got to



"UNBLURRED GENDER SERIES 23" BY ELLEN ROSENBERG



"ANYA" BY NATALIE HOPE MCDONALD

college I met a bunch of people who had had different experiences, whether it was about their coming out or the way they're living," she said. "I realized there weren't many outlets for youth to read or hear about the experiences of others or any way for these people to have their experiences told. So I wanted to have an outlet through these photographs."

Ellen Rosenberg's collection of black-and-white photographs focuses on bodybuilders, highlighting how their sometimes-gender-neutral bodies should be celebrated and not shunned.

Rosenberg, who normally shoots jazz musicians and is also working on an ongoing drag-queen photographic compilation, was somewhat hesitant to take on a project centered on bodybuilders.

"I have a very good friend who a year-and-a-half ago asked me to shoot her during her bodybuilding.

This wasn't anything I'd normally do," she said. "But once I did the first one, it sparked something in me to defend bodybuilding, especially from a female standpoint."

Rosenberg said that when bodybuilders are performing on stage, like drag queens, their gender is often ambiguous to the audience.

"When you

look at them all up on stage, sometimes you're not sure if they're men or women. Bodybuilding is a small piece of my sense of how we as a society immediately make a judgment call on everyone, so I wanted to show the light and the beauty in them," Rosenberg said. "This show shows a lot of movement and sensuality in the muscles and the beauty of the lines. It gets people to look at bodybuilding from a totally different perspective, which is how I started to look at it myself. It was very much a personal growth for me."

Although the work of all three artists varies greatly in subject matter, their messages are similar.

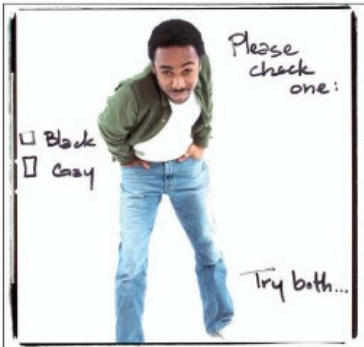
"They're different on many levels, but they're three strong pieces in one show," Smith said.

"The show initiates conversation because of the subject matter that all of us have picked," Rosenberg said. "It's how we see worlds that everyone else tends to walk by."

"The concept of a show like 'Evidence' is to showcase photography that taps into something new, something that may have gone overlooked, and give it credence," McDonald said. "Evidence is something that helps form a conclusion. What that conclusion is will be up to the public."

For more information, visit www.waygay.org or call (215) 732-2220.

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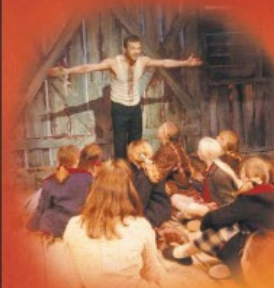
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