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Thursday, May 8, 2008 |

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UVa mascot art fails the smell test



Courtesy Michael Wartella

This still from “The Great ‘Seal’ of Virginia: A Dreamscape” shows Seal, the University of Virginia’s old mascot, rising from the grave to feast on the Cavalier.

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By [BRIAN MCNEILL](#)

Published: May 2, 2008

An exhibit opening Saturday at the University of Virginia Art Museum will be missing one colorful piece — a short film and sculpture that depict a pile of orange and blue dog poop.

Sculptor Irwin Berman, a 1962 graduate of UVa’s School of Medicine, created the scatological artwork as part of his exhibit titled “Sedentary Pleasures: UnCommon Stools.” The showing, which runs through June 15, showcases Berman’s wood, metal, plastic and glass sculptures in the shape of stools (of the sitting kind).

UVa Art Museum officials rejected Berman's submission of the fecal-themed sculpture and a three-minute animated film that tells the story of UVa's second mascot, a 1940s-era cross-eyed mutt named Seal. According to UVa lore, Seal won the love of students after he pooped on the megaphone of an opposing school's cheerleader at a football game.

In the surrealistic film, "The Great 'Seal' of Virginia: A Dreamscape," the ghost of Seal rises from his grave after the Cavalier, UVa's current mascot, pokes at a puppy dog with his saber.

Seal's specter angrily devours the Cavalier, flies into the night sky and then, through the miracle of digestion, deposits the orange-and-blue remnants of the Cavalier onto a massive wooden stool.

A crowd of cheering UVa football fans then hoists the dog — who is wearing a Virginia football helmet — onto their shoulders in celebration. The Latin phrase "Nanos gigantium humeris insidentes" flashes upon the screen, followed by the translation: "We stand on the shoulders of our forebears."

An off-kilter version of UVa's "The Good Old Song" plays as the credits roll.

Accompanying the avant-garde film was Berman's sculpture, a wooden stool covered in fake orange and blue dog droppings.

One of Berman's three collaborators on the project, UVa alumnus and New York City-based animator Michael Wartella, said the artists were deeply disappointed that the university opted against showing the work.

"It's not defecating on the school at all," he said. "We were totally taken aback. It's so ridiculous. OK, sure, there's defecation involved. But it's an art film. You don't have to like it."

UVa spokeswoman Carol Wood stood by the university's rejection of the film and sculpture. Berman, she said, submitted the pieces as an add-on to the approved stool exhibit a month ago. Museum officials told him that they decided it was inappropriate for the exhibition, she said.

"The museum looked at it and decided that it didn't fit within the parameters of the exhibit," Wood said.

Wood added that she was personally unimpressed with the artistic merits of the piece.

"A dog pooping? You can see that by going around the block," she said. "Except in that case, it's not orange and blue."

Wartella pointed out that the film is not overly graphic.

"There's not a close-up," he said. "It's not a John Waters film."

Berman, who is a longtime benefactor of the museum, sought to downplay the kerfuffle in an e-mail late Thursday. "'The Great Seal' was but one of four of my works that were 'edited out' of the university museum exhibit, on grounds which I believe reflected sound curatorial judgments by the museum director and curator," he wrote.

Along with Berman and Wartella, UVa art professor William Bennett and Los Angeles-based musician Sam Retzer also contributed to the work. Retzer, also a UVa alum, wrote and performed the soundtrack. Retzer's past film score credits include "Stomp the Yard" and "Garfield."

The piece was conceived as a fundraising tool for UVa's McIntire Department of Art. The idea was that the artists would sell DVDs of the film for \$100 and would then donate the proceeds to the university.

"It's outrageous that three alumni could come together to create a film to benefit the arts at UVa and the university just 'poo-poo's' it," Wartella wrote in an e-mail. "You've heard of Dadaism? Well, this isn't da-da, it's doo-doo — right in the face of the administration for being so nearsighted as to reject this gift to future students."

UVa's rejection of the art has not scuttled the artists' fundraising plans. The sculpture is on display at the Les Yeux du Monde gallery off the Downtown Mall. Copies of the animated film will be offered in

exchange for gifts to the university's art department, Berman said.

Laura Jones, co-owner of Migration: A Gallery and a Charlottesville art blogger, said UVa's actions set a "bad educational example."

"UVa is trying to straddle between public and private. We have to be very watchful of anything they do that smacks of censorship," said Jones, who stipulated that she has not seen the piece in question. "Once you invite an artist, stand behind them."

Reader Reactions

Posted by (HooFan63) on May 04, 2008 at 8:23 pm

This is a big stink over nothing! I actually saw the film over the weekend, and it is not at all distasteful. In fact, it was quite beautifully done!

Posted by (artPark) on May 02, 2008 at 12:29 pm

Read my comments here:

<http://artpark.typepad.com/artblog/2008/05/hey-did-someone.html>

Posted by (wild2) on May 02, 2008 at 11:02 am

hooray!!! Finally someone stands up to this garbage. It seems nowadays you can do anything as long as you call it "art".