

An artist for the underdog at the Butler

Published: Sun, September 18, 2011 @ 12:00 a.m.
Max Ginsburg Exhibition

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YOUNGSTOWN, OH

It's easy to get lost in a Max Ginsburg painting. The sprawling scenes of city street life are as real and amazingly detailed as photographs — photographs that convey dozens of stories.

Every pedestrian's face wears a telling expression, and every action commands scrutiny as a mini drama unfolds across the canvas.

But of course, these are not photographs.

These are the endeavors of a deft and prolific painter whose career spans more than 55 years and whose works are praised as political and social commentaries recognizing the struggles of everyday citizens.

Mahoning Valley residents will get a rare opportunity to immerse themselves in Ginsburg's world when a retrospective exhibition featuring 94 paintings opens at the Butler Institute of American Art today.

The show runs through Nov. 11, and Butler Director Lou Zona said he is thrilled to have such a large body of Ginsburg's works on display in Youngstown.

"We have had a few Ginsburg paintings in our Midyear Exhibition, but this is the first time we have had an entire show devoted to Ginsburg's work," Zona said, adding, "During the Great Depression, there was a group of artists called social realists who attempted to make a social contribution with their paint brushes. Ginsburg extends this into the 21st century and has updated the painter's voice on social commentary."

Ginsburg, however, said his leaning toward realism hasn't always been well received.

“My development as a realist painter was an uphill struggle through most of the 20th century,” Ginsburg said. “Contemporary traditional realism was discouraged or eliminated in art schools, galleries, museums and among art critics. I firmly believe this is wrong, because in a free society all forms of art should have the freedom of expression to exhibit and develop.”

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Although the collection on display at The Butler ranges from portraits to still lifes to paintings commissioned by publishers for use as book covers, it is Ginsburg's realism — particularly those detailed interpretations of city street life that make social or political statements — that are his claim to fame.

Many of these works depict struggle and blue collar grit — beggars, picketers, or protestors handing out flyers amid bustling crowds, for example.

“A common theme in his work seems to be a tense situation in which passersby must make a choice,” Zona said. “There is always a drama unfolding and people are either choosing to support the cause, or they are just watching, or they are walking away.”

The painting “Bus Stop,” for example, features a group of pedestrians confronted at a bus stop by a beggar leaning on a crutch, holding out a paper cup.

Most of the people in the group ignore the beggar, some with obvious discomfort and disdain, but one elderly woman reaches into her purse.

Is she reaching for her bus ticket, or is she reaching for a dollar to give to the poor man?

“Scenes like this one really make you stop and study the painting to see what is going on,” Zona said. “You question what the people are

doing and what they are thinking and soak in every little detail. Ginsburg's skill level is unbelievable.”

Ginsburg said he has relied on photographs, models and years of experience to capture the meticulously detailed scenes he brings to life upon the canvas.

“I have used photographs as reference, and I have also painted from life, and sometimes when live models or the photographic references were not available I relied, not on my memory, but on my knowledge accumulated over many years of drawing and compositional elements to convey the expressions I wanted,” he said, adding, “I [have] continued to use photography as reference for my street scenes, however, this time my purpose was to capture the ‘reality of the street,’ which I personally chose as my subject matter because it reflected my feelings about life. It enabled me to paint real people unposed with natural choreography, and in actual situations with background details that would have been impossible to imagine.”

To capture just the right facial expressions, Ginsburg sometimes must rely on models.

The painting “War Pieta,” for example, depicts an anguished woman screaming to the heavens as she crouches above the bloodied body of a beloved soldier.

“The woman screaming in agony in ‘War Pieta’ modeled for me at a photo shooting in order to capture this extreme expression,” Ginsburg explained.

“War Pieta” is just one of Ginsburg's paintings conveying agony and heartbreak. Themes of poverty, war and loneliness appear consistently throughout his body of work.

Another painting in the Butler exhibition, for example, features a family displaced after a foreclosure, and another showcases a homeless man slumped miserably on a bench on a dreary winter day.

“Ginsburg identifies with the people he paints and uses them to express his feelings about the human condition,” Zona said. “Many of his characters are outsiders or underdogs.”

Ginsburg was born in Paris in 1931, moved with his family to Brooklyn when he was 2 and has lived and worked in Manhattan most of his life.

The son of a painter, Ginsburg studied art at New York City's famed High School of Music and Art and then at Syracuse University. He earned his living as a commercial artist from 1955 to 1960, and then acquired a full-time teaching job at New York City's High School of Art and Design from 1960 until 1981.

Ginsburg worked as an illustrator from 1980 until 2004, achieving particular success painting covers for novels.

Growing up during the Depression in the Jewish neighborhood of Boro Park, Ginsburg witnessed racism against Jews, blacks and other nonwhites.

His youth also was shaped by the unfolding horrors of World War II, and both anti-war and civil-rights themes show up repeatedly in his work.

“The type of realism I do is more of an *alla prima* approach, which I liken to Rembrandt, Velasquez and Sargent. However, there are many contemporary ateliers that work more in the French Academic manner, unlike my approach, which are heroically helping to make realistic art more popular, this is a most welcome trend,” Ginsburg said.