

SUNDAY LIFE

ARTS SOCIETY TRAVEL WEDDINGS | SECTION D » SUNDAY, APRIL 25, 2010 » THE TENNESSEAN

Art from a nation divided visits First Amendment Center

By Will Ayers
THE TENNESSEAN

What if creating art the way you wanted meant going to jail? What if you were under constant surveillance by a team of secret police? What if the place where you grew up was behind a wall with guard towers and barbed wire?

That's a taste of what 10 dissident German artists featured in a show now at the First Amendment Center lived through. Many of them eventually left East Germany, but during the time they lived there before reunification in 1990, they were never totally free to express themselves.

In photographs, sculpture, paintings and mixed-media pieces, you get a sense of how deeply the country was torn for so many years, and how paranoia and repression shaped the art of the time.

The show was created by Jeff Thinnies, a lawyer by training who lived in Berlin during the early '90s and who still does business there. When he lived there, he grew to love the art of Inge Schmidt (who's featured in the show), and never forgot how her paintings encapsulated the way Germany felt immediately after the Berlin Wall came down.

To mark the 20th anniversary of German reunification (or unification, as some call it), he decided to put together a traveling show of German artists through Breakthrough Art Organization, a

venture he founded last year. The idea was to celebrate the milestone, but also to remind Americans of how good they have it.

"These are really precious rights that we have, and those are pretty important values that these artists lived (out), in terms of their courage and their willingness to take risks and their total dedication to freedom, so much so that they gave theirs up to exercise it, in a way," he said.

Walking among the temporary walls that bear the art, it's sometimes easy to forget where the show stops and where the First Amendment Center's permanent collection of images from the Civil Rights movement starts.

"All these objects, paintings and photos installed in this building develop a very, very interesting interaction with the other stuff that is there," said Wolfgang Petrick, who left East Germany as a boy in 1951 and worked as an artist just across the river in West Berlin for years.

Petrick's work is surrealist and arresting, reflecting his forced divorce from the places he knew as a boy. There's also mixed-media work by Frank Rödel, who spent more than three years as a political prisoner; photographs of everyday life by Harald Hauswald, who would smuggle his work out of East Germany through wordless hand-offs in front of an accomplice's apartment; and more mixed media by Robert Weber, who in one series of pieces



Robert Weber, *Holderlins List I*, 2010

incorporated the government's typewritten list of the things he carried when he finally left East Germany, right down to his belt and handkerchief.

"Think about it — with all that we have, would we be willing to stuff these few things into a backpack and say, 'I'm starting my life all over again?'" Thinnies said.

Some of the art is jarring and raw, particularly the sculpture of Hans Scheib. Much of it reflects a sense of isolation. But the exhibit pulses with a strong sense

IF YOU GO

What: 20 Years After German Unification — Critical Perspectives of Berlin Artists

Where: First Amendment Center, 1207 18th Ave. S.

When: Through May 8

Hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday

Admission: free

Note: Next week, some of the artists represented will speak at a free panel discussion alongside members of Nashville's civil rights movement, 3-5 p.m. Wednesday at the First Amendment Center. RSVP to breakthroughsvp@gmail.com.

Contact: 727-1600 or www.breakthroughart.org

of humanity; there are powerful reminders everywhere of how keenly the artists mourned for the Germany they knew, or in some cases never knew, and how they yearned for freedom, for oneness.

"This is not just something you read about in a textbook," Thinnies said. "These are real people's lives."

The show will continue on to Aspen, Colo., Washington, D.C., San Antonio and one other American city to be determined.

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