

WEST SIDE NEWS

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Lessons learned from art & artists

By Wanda Southerland
Editor

The notion of life imitating art was expressed by Oscar Wilde as "Life imitates art, more than art imitates life" in his 1889 essay, "The Decay of Lying." It's a turnaround from the usual situation in which the artist creates art inspired by the life and world around them. When life imitates art, reality reflects what had previously been expressed in art, literature or drama.

A painter who emigrated from East Germany created a series of semi-abstract paintings around the fall of the Berlin Wall.

As a result of her departure from East Germany in 1984, Inge Schmidt became a keen onlooker when the Berlin Wall fell, observing the new situation with both hope and skepticism.

"I always deal with the human being - his mindset and vision. Power and dynamism prevail in my work. It is the representation of my own experience overcoming tragic, difficult and seemingly hopeless moments through optimism and, above all, courage," she stated.

In the early 1990s, Jeff Thinnes, who, along with his wife Fionnuala Gallet Thinnes, later founded the Breakthrough Art organization, met Schmidt after seeing her impactful images. Thinnes, an attorney who obtained a Masters of Public Administration at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, was deputy director of Aspen Institute Berlin, an international policy and leadership institute in Berlin.

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Inge Schmidt's "Welcome". Schmidt is one of 9 artists who will be in Nashville for the Breakthrough! Twenty Years After German Unification - Critical Perspectives of Berlin Artists, an inaugural program championing free expression in the face of repression. The exhibit will run from April 18 - May 8 at the John Seigenthaler Center at Vanderbilt University.

Art ...

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"She offered deep insights into the rationale and risks of being a dissident artist in former East Germany," Thinnes shared.



Jeff Thinnes

So, in 2009, Breakthrough Art Organization (BAO) was founded to champion artists whose works are a means of overcoming political, social and personal challenges.

Its inaugural exhibition and education program is coming to the John Seigenthaler Center at Vanderbilt University April 18 to May 8. Nashville is the first of five cities in the United States for the "Breakthrough! Twenty Years After German Unification - Critical Perspectives of Berlin Artists" tour.

BAO, based in Washington, D.C., will host a discussion forum April 20 in partnership with the First Amendment Center, which is headquartered at the Seigenthaler Center.

The discussion will bring together visual artists from former East Germany and Nashville's participants in America's Civil Rights Movement.

The artists, who endured repression, imprisonment and exile for the sake of free expression prior to the 1989

fall of the Berlin Wall and the resultant reunification of Germany in 1990, will exchange ideas and compare experiences with those involved in the historic Nashville lunch counter sit-ins.

April 19 marks the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement that galvanized the community regarding civil rights.

Moderators for the forum are John Seigenthaler, founder of the First Amendment Center; Thinnes and Gene Policinski, executive director of the Center.

"By launching Breakthrough at the First Amendment Center, among the foremost institutions in the country supporting the First Amendment and the core freedoms it ensures, we are sending a strong message that Breakthrough is as much about the artists' determination to freely express themselves as it is about their compelling works of art," Thinnes said. "Their courageous leadership links them with people in other cultures and other times, including Nashville's Civil Rights heroes, who were willing to risk everything for freedom."

Policinski said the event will remind Americans of

how precious and rare those freedoms are and how recently they were restricted and repressed by government.

"Young people often take our freedoms for granted," Thinnes said. "When art reflects life, we have a unique opportunity to touch hearts and minds that can't be done with a textbook."

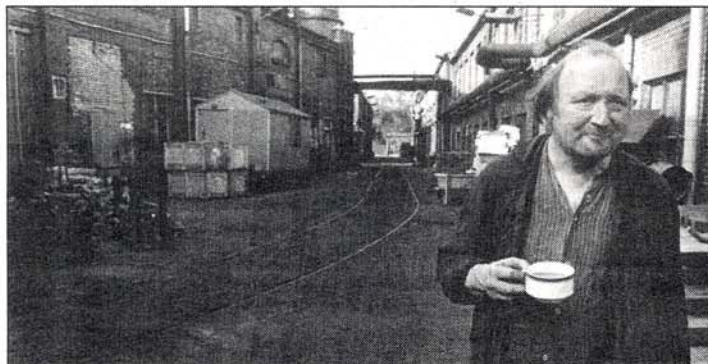
On April 19, junior and high school students will have opportunities to interact with artists.

Teachers, students and others can download a module to review prior to attending the exhibit, which is free and open to the public from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Nine of the 10 East German visual artists whose works are featured will be in Nashville for the first week of the exhibition and will be on-hand to meet with students on April 19, as well as at a Civil Rights Discussion Forum from 3-5 p.m. on April 20.

Then, on April 22, an artist-to-artist forum will be held featuring an exchange between the German artists and their Nashville counterparts. This event is by invitation only.

For more information go to www.breakthroughart.org or firstamendmentcenter.org.



Gerald Adam Hahn's "Unskilled Laborer".