

THE ART OF WILLIAM NOGUERA

Leah Garchik

Monday - July 23, 2007

The finer things in life -- art and baseball -- were celebrated Wednesday at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts; the backdrop was San Quentin. On the first floor, the Institute for Unpopular Culture presented the art of William Noguera, who was locked up for a murder he committed in 1983, and who has been on Death Row since 1988. And upstairs, in the screening room, the Film Arts Foundation presented Loren Mendell and Tiller Russell's documentary "Bad Boys of Summer," which is about the prison baseball team (and was described in a Datebook story last week).

Noguera works with a Rapidograph pen, precisely stippling black and white images with such clarity that they look like photographs or Vermeers. He is inspired by photos but does not project the images to enlarge them, depending instead on the accuracy of his eye and skill of his hand. Most of the images were black-and-white; at the back were three works in color, two abstract and one a pop image of Marilyn Monroe. The possibility of venturing into new territory is at the heart of Noguera's passion for art.

Institute for Unpopular Culture founder David Ferguson handed me his cell phone so I could talk with the artist, who called collect from San Quentin. Some of what he said was what he'd said in a short film shown upstairs ("Art to me is not a luxury, it is a necessity"), but his description of the arc of his work was fresh. There are young genius artists like Picasso, he said, and there are old masters like Rembrandt, who got better with age. "I want to be doing my best work 20 or 30 years from now. My newest works are moving toward abstractions." Earlier representational works "were almost Art for Dummies. They were so realistic, so everyone would understand. ... Now that I'm getting a reputation for being a guy who can draw, I can take the next step." Locked up in a 4-by-10-foot cell, Noguera moves forward.

Upstairs, Film Arts' showing of "Bad Boys of Summer" was followed by a Q&A with the filmmakers and an array of people shown in the telling of the story, including former San Quentin Giants coach Earl Smith, who is the moral center of the movie. It's logical that prisoners play baseball, said Smith, because "in baseball, if you bat .300, you're good. That means hitting three out of 10 times. And seven out of 10 times, you blew it." In prison, "the people that are there blew it."

P.S.: After two sold-out showings, "Bad Boys" extended its run through the weekend and more. It plays at 7:30 p.m. today, Wednesday and Friday at the Film Arts Foundation.

Thursday's San Francisco Jewish Film Festival opening was a joyous occasion, as is almost every film festival opening. People sharing some aspect of their lives -- religion, ethnic background, sexual orientation, a sheer love of movies -- come together with well-wishers to celebrate themselves and what they have in common.

At the traditional party on the Castro mezzanine, you could hear familiar one-liners about the festival being a kind of cultural high holiday for Bay Area Jews; meanwhile, downstairs, the crowd was rushing in to find seats in the theater. As a result of long experience -- festival director Peter Stein said some patrons had even been spotted bringing masking tape to mark off seats they were saving for friends -- the opening night has become a reserved-seat event. "But some people have told me they miss the chaos," said Stein, which is perfectly in keeping with the humorous trailer from a few years ago about patrons, loving and kvetching at the same time.

Anyway, donors were thanked, the board was introduced, speeches were made, director-screenwriter Dror Shaul was introduced, and then the movie rolled. "Sweet Mud" is an Israeli feature set in a fictional kibbutz in the '70s, as seen through the eyes of a 12-year-old boy. It was stunningly sad, moving, revealing. Five minutes into it, the intensity of the audience's attention was singular, as though the movie were being watched by one pair of eyes, the story perceived by one consciousness. And of all the highs at a film festival, that's the highest.

-- Bill Gates visited the Exploratorium last week. Director Dennis Bartels and board chairman George Cogan were at the Phaeno Science Center in Wolfsburg, Germany, which recently bought \$800,000 worth of Exploratorium exhibits, so they weren't there to show him around.

-- Chuck and Robby Robinson, visiting Paris, sat at a table at Caviar Kaspia next to a table occupied by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife, Cecilia. They arrived at 10:30 p.m. and left soon after midnight, having "ordered heaps of caviar, dessert and café." Some of the restaurant's caviar was selling for 675 euros a portion.

In the Montgomery Street BART Station, Lee Binswanger overheard a street singer with a Mohawk, who usually specializes in Johnny Cash songs, yell at a passing woman who was carrying a big pink box: "Cheer the hell up! You got a cake!"

That means you, too.

Public eavesdropping

"Honey, don't call grandma 'dude.' "

-- Mother to daughter, overheard at the San Francisco Zoo by Jim Prescott

E-mail Leah Garchik at lgarchik@sfchronicle.com.

This article appeared on page E - 8 of the San Francisco Chronicle