

Art, dreams and jazz



Your eyes can get a real workout at the Broad Art Museum — from rolling to the back of your head. I'm not talking about the art, but the people you run into: Self-styled experts who can't shut up, wise-guys who ask where the "real" art is, preening hipsters, outraged moralists, "this reminds-me-of" reductionists — they all show up sooner or later, usually right next to you.

But soft! Every now and then, you overhear a person so engaged, smart and interesting you want to tag along — all the way home, if possible. Michael Stratton is such a person.

Thursday, the East Lansing psychotherapist/author/DJ will weave together ideas he's drawn from his interlinking interests in jazz improvisation, dreams, creativity and healing as he leads an informal tour for Broad members focusing on three artists on display. Needless to say, the host of WLNZ's "Vinyl Side of Midnight" will provide a carefully chosen musical soundtrack.

The tour is a new twist in community outreach at the Broad. Although Stratton minored in art history in college, he's not an expert in art. That's the whole idea of "Altered," an informal series of museum tours that will continue in the coming months, according to Broad's development coordinator Sandra Szymanski. She called Stratton the perfect "guinea pig" to kick off the series.

"He's so versatile, so many things," Szymanski said. "Most importantly, he's already an art lover. It was a no-brainer, a perfect fit for him to be our first."

Szymanski got the idea from a popular program at the Denver Art Museum.

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"A lot of people, myself included, don't know much about contemporary art," Szymanski said. "I can see how it can be intimidating to be talked at. Mike's going to talk about art from a jazz perspective. He's an expert on dreams, and that's something I don't need to be afraid of."

Stratton has written a novel, "Everybody Dreams," and given talks at Creativity and Madness conferences in Maui and Santa Fe that drew enthusiastic crowds of over 1,000 people. The talks used Akira Kurasawa's film "Dreams" to unlock historical, spiritual, psychological and personal doors between dream and waking worlds.

At the Broad, he will project his dream work on a larger canvas. If dreams are a way of examining our lives, art does the same for our culture.

"The arts are to the culture what dreams are to the individual," Stratton said. "Artists express the zeitgeist, what's going on, in a bigger way. The artist says the thing that remains unsaid."

Stratton has been preparing the Broad tour for months, but he plans to throw away the notes and let his talk go in spontaneous directions, as a jazz musician might. He'll also encourage tour participants to riff freely as they react to his insights. If the dialogue goes as he hopes, lights will go on in people's heads, just they do with his patients in therapy.

Early this year, Szymanski and Stratton walked through the Broad together and studied upcoming exhibits. Stratton found three artists who got his juices flowing and whose work would be on view at the Broad at the same time.

He'll start the tour with Mithu Sen's staggering "Border Unseen," a pink mass of fleshy, toothy matter made of polymer, dentures and false teeth, housed in a gallery painted pink.

"It's a lot to take in," Stratton said. "It's definitely a spectacle. It's like a landscape of flesh, 80 feet of it. She's placed some of her own little toys in there."

The work's undulating waves of horror, playfulness and sexuality intersect nicely with Stratton's interest in dreams. (Jazz fans will note that Thelonious Monk's "Ugly Beauty" will play during this part of the tour.)

Next, Stratton will take the group into the world of Pakistani artist Imran Qureshi, unquestionably the Broad's international star attraction this spring and summer. Stratton met Qureshi as he put together his exhibit two weeks ago and they discussed the social and political dimensions of his work.

Qureshi's public art, dispersed around the sidewalks and alleys of East Lansing, looks like blood spatters from a distance, but close examination reveals intricate stylized petals and finely

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painted miniature forms. Talking with Qureshi, Stratton said he was reminded of jazz saxophonist John Coltrane, whose furious, dense music often got him mislabeled as angry.

“When people met (Coltrane), he was this gentle guy (who) would deny being angry at all,” Stratton said. “In ran, too — he’s putting out these fiery statements, and he’s a sweetheart of a guy. There’s this transcendent quality growing out of the blood.”

Then Stratton plans to “cleanse the palate” by going to the Broad’s Education Wing to talk about Shinique Smith’s “Arcadian Clusters,” a cheerful array of hanging bundles made from a crazy-quilt variety of materials.

“Jazz musicians do something very similar with sound material to create what she’s doing visually,” he said.

One of Stratton’s most important goals for the tour is to tap into art’s power to alter consciousness — “being awake, flat-out being aware, opening your senses and letting this wash into you.”

Years ago, after watching the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the fabled avant-garde jazz group, Stratton was left with the heady feeling the concert had never really ended.

“Everything I experienced afterward was musical,” he said. “Traffic, the sound of the restaurant — it was all musical because of the way they approached the art.”

He hopes that after the tour at the Broad, people will have a similar buzz “that everything they see is artistic and makes statements about their world and their relatedness to the world.”

“Altered: Featuring Michael Stratton”

Thursday, May 22 6:30 p.m. mix and mingle; 7:30 p.m. tour Eli & Edythe Broad Art Museum
547 E. Circle Drive, MSU campus, East Lansing FREE (Broad Art Museum members only,
limited space) RSVP szyman48@msu.edu or (517) 884-3914