

Vault gleams with artist's gold

New Bedford Art Museum displays works by Michael Cochran

By JOANNA McQUILLAN WEEKS, Assistant features editor

At first glimpse, what captures the imagination of visitors viewing Michael Cochran's work at the New Bedford Art Museum is the gleam of gold in the former bank vault.

When they step inside the compact space to examine closely the sculptures and drawings, they may feel they have encountered the artifacts of some lost civilization we have not yet learned to understand.

"Vault Series Focus: Michael Cochran," curated by Joan Backes, fills the lower vault at the museum with five sculptures and six drawings.

"Michael Cochran transforms earthly materials ... into poignant reminders of the spiritual potential in each of us," a reviewer commented 20 years ago. The same statement rings true today.

In his statement accompanying the exhibit, Mr. Cochran explains, "For over 20 years I have been utilizing gold leaf on the surface of my sculpture for its luminous and symbolic qualities. The forms are manifestations of many years of interest and studies of ancient cultures and non-European philosophies. My focus has been on objects that symbolize power and dynamic energy."

"Pranja," created last year, is somehow both substantial and delicate at the same time, a bowl shape with the barest of depressions. Its title is Sanskrit for wisdom.

"Sadhana," also from 2003, is a lens shape pierced by a square opening. "Ody" of 2002 is a grid with rounded contours.

All sheathed in 22-carat gold leaf, the forms are pleasing, seductive in their sheen, seeming to invite touch.

A student of Eastern philosophy since the early '60s and a meditator since the early 1970s, Mr. Cochran comments in his gallery statement, "My titles are words from ancient languages that give each work a name but mask the meaning in the mystery of that language. Naming is critical but initial viewer response to each form is important to me and shouldn't be affected by information revealed in a title."

Indeed, the drawings have only numbers for titles. Meticulous -- some might say obsessive -- in their execution, they are nonetheless mesmerizing. Viewers may find themselves thinking, as I did, of Jodie Foster in the movie "Contact," listening intently to sounds from the universe, trying to discern a message.

Mr. Cochran explains, "This is a new series of gold leaf drawings and represents a movement toward more specific formal concerns of movement and manipulation of reflected light through the interaction of marks and patterns. Once the gold leaf is applied to the paper a grid is drawn and then the process of applying the ink marks is begun. The mark making is an exercise in focusing and centering similar to the processes of chanting and repetitive prayer."

Now a resident of Norton, Mr. Cochran has had a long career as an artist, arts administrator and educator. It has taken him from California to New York to Boston and Providence. Most recently, he was member services director of the Alliance of Artists Communities in Providence, and before that, dean of graduate and continuing education at Massachusetts College of Art.

The Vault Series exhibits curated by Ms. Backes are a particular boon to the museum, said Executive Director Karie Vincent, because "they give the viewers really varied contemporary art from throughout the world," thanks to the curator's international contacts.

They also help to make the museum a valuable resource for art students from UMass and elsewhere, she pointed out.



BOB RIZZO

"Vault Series Focus: Michael Cochran" fills the lower vault at the New Bedford Art Museum with mystical works that lure viewers with the gleam of gold.

For the art-loving public at large, the Cochran exhibit provides a momentary respite from the increasingly chaotic world in which we live.

"That space is very intimate," Ms. Vincent pointed out. "I think that contributes to the sense of peace."

Allow yourself to become absorbed in Mr. Cochran's drawings, and you may find yourself calmed by both their apparent simplicity and their meticulous execution. Meditate on the sculptures, and you may feel your racing mind stilled.

"Vault Series Focus: Michael Cochran" continues through May 25 at New Bedford Art Museum, 608 Pleasant St. The museum is open noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday, and until 7 p.m. on Thursdays. Admission is \$3 for adults, \$2 for students and seniors, free for children under 17. For more information, call (508) 961-3072.

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