

## WEEKEND!

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E-mail: tclife@madison.com

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Exhibit  
uncovers

meaning in

artistic  
obsessionBy Kevin Lynch  
*The Capital Times*

**E**ver visit the studio of an active, inspired artist? It often seems like profuse, colorful chaos. You may sense madness to their method.

And, perhaps, obsession. Why else would someone risk a career in activity that others may not understand or care about?

Obsession, for an artist, is a uneasy balance of personal vision and, possibly, hidden demons.

Think of Picasso, modern art's greatest — and perhaps most prolific — artist. He was also a heedless fiend who left ruin and heartache in his wake.

A new art show at Promega Corp., 5445 Cheryl Parkway, carries the nice, politically correct title "Showcase of Multicultural Artists" and runs through Sept. 29.

But don't be fooled — or deterred — by the banal monicker. Curator Daniel Swadener admits this show is all about obsession: how it works and manifests itself in art and life.

In a society that rarely motivates or sustains artists, how does powerful and original art really get done?

By driven, personal passion.

Swadener hardly suggests these artists have Picasso's boorishness, but he sees them as outsiders who may also be originals.

"This is my version of so-called outsider art, because too much of the fashionable stuff with that label is crap," Swadener says bluntly.

These artists convey compulsive energy, but mastery of necessary craft. They include two well-known Madisonians, cartoonist P.S. Mueller and



The obsessive qualities of several artists, in a current exhibit at Promega Corp., are reflected in Andy Ewen's surrealist untitled drawing (above left), in Harold Zizla's oil "Frank Lloyd Wright and John Marin (Wrong and Right)," (above) and Gethsemane Seferopoulos' acrylic "A Bee, the Honey of Love Symbolizing the Sweetness of Gethsemane for Her Daughter Marina" (below).



Andy Ewen, who's better known as the leader of the blues-rock band Honor Among Thieves.

Enter the lobby and you'll be pulled right in by the buzzing energy of painter Harold Zizla's abstract portraits, mostly of famous artists and composers. Swadener says that, at one point in Zizla's career, the

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# Art

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75-year-old retired Indiana University art professor densely reworked his multicolored paintings — into virtual blackness. With this recent work, he's pulled back his hyper-cubistic frenzy, somewhat.

Fairly unrecognizable, these portraits betray Zizla's voracious manipulation of seemingly every molecule of a subject's body. They resemble figures engulfed by locusts, while giving off sparks of their own brilliant, disintegrating energy.

It's disconcerting and fascinating art — and enhanced by imaginative titles, such as "Orson Welles, Bigger than Life, But Dead," or "Beethoven, Not Hearing — Sensing."

**T**he curator may be a tad obsessive himself. Swadener decided to tightly cram Zizla's paintings onto the walls, to convey compulsiveness.

"It should be full of color and art, almost to the point where people say, back off," he says.

Rather than choose artists by slide submissions, Swadener typically visits studios to get the look and buzz of their creative process — even artists as far away as Greece or Africa.

Now, Promega's hallways are jammed with nearly 150 works. But the dense diversity works — in the varying curves, textures and levels of the two-floor gallery space.

Cartoonist Mueller never lets his energy obscure his message. His quickly rendered images use pithy punch lines for human figures with pointy, skeletal features, resembling Kafkaesque insects.

Mueller himself is a busy drone with finely tuned antennae for socio-political absurdity, and is renowned for his cartoons in national magazines such as *The Progressive* and *The New Yorker*.

One snooty, praying mantis-like man sniffs at a woman in a bar: "I'm too full of myself to be hungry."

Then there's a compulsive capitalist, on a cell phone, barking: "If the universe is still expanding, get me some more."

Mueller, like many writers and artists, has long sensed the spiritual futility of humans who see The

Big Picture as just something to get a bigger piece of.

Ultimately, such arrogant power amounts to overgrown narcissism, Mueller suggests, in another image. Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialist philosopher and author of "Being and Nothingness," is depicted wearing high heels, as an experiment. Sartre knowingly concludes: "still nothing."

The other Madisonian, Andy Ewen, is also compelled to produce darkly comical images, despite the demands of his musical career. These drawings look like nightmarish mutations, formed by visual punning that is both whimsical and creepy.

A robotic, helmeted construction worker "plays" a pick ax — with a guitar pick.

In another untitled work, a white bird, trapped inside of a skeleton figure, struggles to wriggle through the skull's eye and nose holes.

**O**ther art in the show is more upbeat.

Anna Arnold, based in Cleveland, creates paintings and sculptures of dazzlingly pigmented figures, often of pop-culture figures, such as a free-standing life-size cutout painting of singer Tina Turner. Or she does eye-popping depictions of humans as fully integrated with vegetation, such as the relief sculpture "Paradise."

Creative obsession dwells anywhere — in Tanzania or Greece as easily as Cleveland. African Robino Ntifa does multicolored etchings, depicting life in his native Tanzania. The artist loves complex, swarming details of nature and people-packed communal gatherings, such as "Mask Dance" or "Celebration After Harvesting."

Greek artist Gethsemane Seferopoulos employs a naive style to depict dense flora and fauna. But more than simply overgrown visual excess, these images jell into finely quivering wholes.

In her large acrylic painting, "A Bee, the Honey of Love Symbolizing the Sweetness of Gethsemane for Her Daughter Marina," the artist and daughter peer out from the lower right. But the artist's improbably long ponytail rises in a diagonal swoop across the whole canvas, dividing the vegetation into visually pleasing portions.

These artists prove that, at some point, a good artist finds ways to corral obsession, to make it a phenomenon to behold, and savor.