

The eye of the beholder

From the Great Depression to modern day, 'Hobos to Street People' showcases artists' interpretation of poverty and homelessness

BY CAROL HARVEY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Terry Chandler stood in the vaulted art gallery. Her tiny 4 foot, 11 inch figure was dwarfed by the colorful painting of a Hispanic boy walking to school past a rotten tomato splashed against graffiti on a wall, ordering "Homeless Go Home." He is protected by four adults as he walks to a school for homeless children. Artist Nili Yosha crafted the work after Norman Rockwell's illustration of guards escorting a small black girl into a newly integrated Little Rock school.

Terry tilted her head, peering at me with a shy, sardonic smile. "When people say this," she observed, "They are doing it to be mean."

"It's good that homeless people get to see (this show) too. Then we can tell you if it's real or not."

"The best thing about this show is it makes people think." Her voice echoed slightly, "I live it. It's so real. All this is so true."

In April 2009, I invited four formerly or currently unhoused San Franciscans to The California Historical Society, 678 Mission Street. They viewed a collection of paintings, prints, photographs and mixed media pieces by more than 40 artists represented in an exhibition entitled "Hobos to Street People: Artists' Responses to Homelessness from the New Deal to the Present." The show began February 19 and continues to August 15, 2009.

Charming, well-spoken Terry Chandler, 27, once slept in nearby Annie Alley next to a Dumpster pictured in an exhibit photo. After one night on the street restlessly avoiding biting rats, Eric Robinson, 54, stays in shelters or with friends. David Suttles,

56, camped in the street with his wife after a corrupt residential hotel management eviction. Travis, 28, read John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* just before he was forced to leave home.

Curator Art Hazelwood reported positive reactions to the show. Visitors' occasional negative responses reflect a "demonization" of homelessness and homeless people by the press and social stereotyping.

"People want to turn homeless people into a kind of 'other' that they can dismiss," he said. "It's easier to dismiss people if you categorize them and accuse them of being morally lax."

Terry agreed. Her brown bangs swung adamantly. "The newspaper tells people things that aren't true, and people believe it."

This false stereotype "is not something new," says Hazelwood. "One answer to almost any complaint is to point to identical patterns of condemnation throughout our history." The cheap fix of Gavin Newsom's Care Not Cash program and Rudy Guiliani's attempt to sweep away New York homeless like broken glass are paralleled by 19th century social workers who concluded poor people were lazy, defective degenerates who needed rehabilitation by learning the value of work, and so sent them to forced labor workhouses "breaking rocks."

Doug Minkler is a satirist who has a close connection with street life. His "Who Drives The Cycle of Poverty" was commissioned by the National Lawyers Guild in response to welfare "reform" under President Clinton, which Minkler says did "a lot more damage than any Republican." The National Lawyer's Guild, seeing this "as a real attack on women, (and) the poor, hired me to do a piece on the concept."

Did Hazelwood choose it for the show



because it satirizes the perpetual poverty "cycle," its studded tires gunned toward us by a vicious boar-like pig? For its very existence, our capitalist republic seems to require, at varying levels of intensity, poverty's perpetual presence, cycling endlessly round. Out of its exhaust pours poisonous gas — welfare cuts, layoffs, unemployment, homelessness.

"Who drives this cycle?" Minkler asks. "Welfare queens? Illegal aliens? Bleeding heart liberals? Capitalist pigs? Crash the cycle of poverty!"

Hazelwood is himself a San Francisco artist whose etching-style linocuts have appeared in San Francisco's "Street Sheet" and the East Bay's "Street Spirit" print papers since 1994, and more recently in *Street Roots*.

A year and a half before the economy plunged and the banking crisis caused home foreclosures, mass evictions, and a surge in homelessness, Hazelwood planned a commemoration of the New Deal's 75th anniversary. During talks about parallels between the Depression era and today with the Western Regional Advocacy Project's

Paul Boden and New Deal expert and Berkeley professor Dr. Gray Brechin, it struck Hazelwood that a show comparing homelessness in the '30s with contemporary homelessness was a brilliant way to make clear to people, "We've been through this before. We can get through it again. If we try, we can do something to (solve) this problem."

The show's sections focus on four aspects of homelessness: daily realities; displacement, rootlessness and vulnerability; urban vs. rural; and struggle and hope.

The show contrasts the two eras and challenges our narrow range of homeless stereotypes. Homeless people are many and varied. People live in cars, in the country, hold down jobs, work recycling, live in — or refuse — dangerous shelters for the street.

In Christine Hanlon's contemporary oil painting, "Third Street Corridor" and Isaac Friedlander's "Gold digger," (1932) people struggle, working hard for little. In "Corridor," the shopping cart is conversely an overfull garbage collection device and a horn of plenty, the ironic symbol of rampant consumerism, while in "Gold digger," trash becomes pure gold to a ragged scavenger.

Most don't consider tented people working in fields as homeless. Depression artist Dorothea Lange photographed a young mother seated in a Ford near Tulelake, Calif., with her two babies, one holding a nipples Coke bottle (1939). Nearby hangs David Bacon's photo of a Mexican mother and child camped on a hillside in Del Mar, Calif. "They are still the

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Above, "And now where?" by Rockwell Kent, 1882, 1971. Lithograph. Courtesy of private collection.

At left, *Christ of the Breadline* (1953), by Fritz Eichenberg, (1901-1990) Wood Engraving. Courtesy of University of Rhode Island Library Special Collections



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