

GO FOR A LAP DANCE, STAY FOR THE LITHOGRAPHS

Penal art on the rise at Sweet Illusions nightclub

Art is as art does, and sometimes we find it in the most unusual of places: Wallace Shawn, for instance, brought lower Manhattan audiences into posh bourgeois apartments to stage *The Fever*; Wayne Coyne gathered Flaming Lips fans into an Austin parking garage for his *Zaireeka* boom-box experiment; and another Wayne — Wayne Vajgert of Springfield — is hoping local art aficionados are willing to wander outside the gallery scene in order to view his growing collection of outlaw art.

Chicago-born Vajgert is owner and proprietor of Sweet Illusions, a Springfield nightclub that features dancing of the not-exactly-balletic persuasion — as in, yes, a strip bar, with stage, steely pole and the whole bada bing. For the past eight years or so, Vajgert, who has a master's degree in speech therapy from the UO, has been tracking down works of graphic art that focus on the sublime geometry of the female form, and his collection now includes prints from late *Playboy* illustrator Alberto Vargas, lithographic pin-up postcards from the '30s and '40s (soldiers in WWII copied these "bombshells" onto the noses of planes) and Chinese pen-and-ink portraits that are sparse and highly stylized.

But it's his expanding collection of prisoner art that this sweet illusionist most wants to share. About three years back, Vajgert began receiving boxes via snail mail containing prints drawn by a friend who was serving out a term at the federal pen in Florence, Colo.; he says the drawings started as a means of passing time, but it became something more. "You need to figure out something you really like doing," Vajgert says, adding that he urged his friend to keep sending him his work. Soon that friend was sending drawings and paintings by other prisoners, essentially playing agent and middleman to Vajgert the collector. Most of the work now comes from a federal penitentiary in Florida.

Sweet Illusions doesn't have the typical bleach-and-blacklight ambiance of your average strip club; the place is clean, classy and well-appointed (Vajgert notes that he painted the walls a "peaceful" lavender, as opposed to the "aggressive" black of most nightclubs). Of course, the club's raison d'être is its three-dimensional appeal, and you can argue all day about whether the come-hither slithering of a naked dancer qualifies as art. But tear your eyes away from the thumpa-thumpa on stage, and you'll notice a fine decorative flair about the place, the most noticeable aspect of which is the collection of framed prints on the wall.

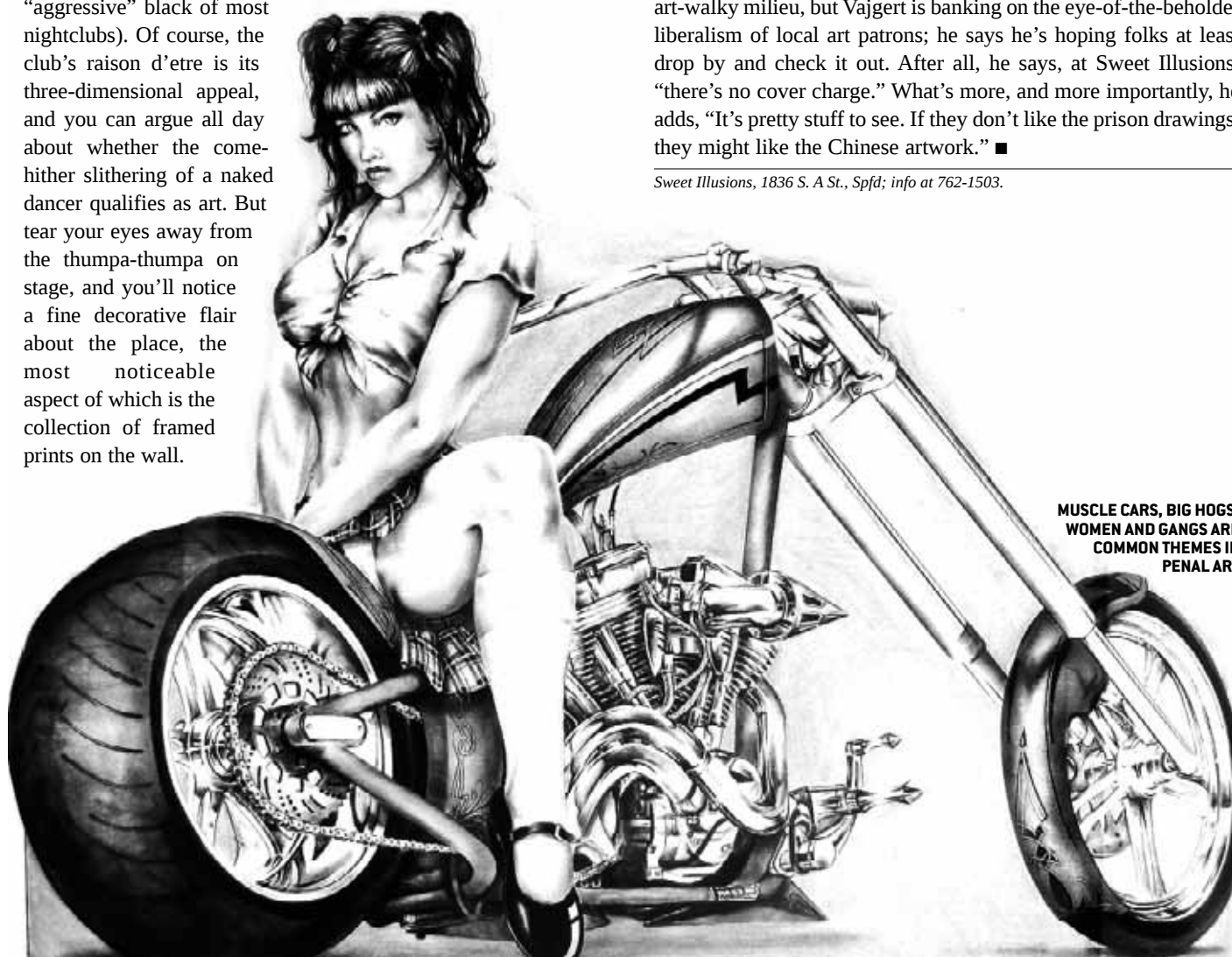


"It's pretty stuff to see," Vajgert says of his art collection. He leads me on a tour around the club, and as we reconnoiter the rim, as it were, Vajgert waxes poetic about the aesthetics and history of each individual piece. Perhaps in keeping with the punitive praxis of our penal code, none of the pieces by prisoners are titled or attributed; this anonymity somehow adds to the mimetic oomph of drawings birthed behind bars.

Kafka, with his scarification and beetles, may have contemplated the nightmare of endless incarceration, but these guys down Florida way — they live it, and it shows in their amateur but surprisingly sharp and sophisticated drawings. Many of the prisoners, Vajgert says, are forced to fashion their own media, seeing as they aren't allowed the potential weaponry of pencils or other sharp objects; same with colors. Common themes thread through the work: muscle cars and big hogs; hyperbolic religious symbolism; the passage of time; and, of course, women. Gangs and gang insignia also play a large part in the collection of prisoner art, though, as Vajgert says, "If it's gang-related I can't put it up." Remember: lavender walls.

Obviously, prison prints hung in a strip bar are not your typical art-walky milieu, but Vajgert is banking on the eye-of-the-beholder liberalism of local art patrons; he says he's hoping folks at least drop by and check it out. After all, he says, at Sweet Illusions, "there's no cover charge." What's more, and more importantly, he adds, "It's pretty stuff to see. If they don't like the prison drawings, they might like the Chinese artwork." ■

Sweet Illusions, 1836 S. A St., Spfd; info at 762-1503.



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END OF WATCH (DIG) R 12:00, 2:35, 5:10, 7:45, 10:20	PARANORMAN (DIG) PG 12:05, 2:30, 4:45, 7:05, 9:25
FINDING NEMO (2012) (3D) G 11:45, 5:05, 7:45	PITCH PERFECT (DIG) PG-13 1:50, 4:30, 7:10, 9:50
FINDING NEMO (2012) (DIG) G 2:25, 10:25	THE POSSESSION (2012) (DIG) PG-13 12:50, 3:10, 5:30, 7:50, 10:15
FRANKENWEENIE (3D) PG 12:00, 4:40, 7:00	RESIDENT EVIL: RETRIBUTION (DIG) R 2:25
FRANKENWEENIE (DIG) PG 2:20, 9:20	RESIDENT EVIL: RETRIBUTION (3D) R 11:55, 4:55, 7:25, 9:55
HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA (3D) PG 4:50, 9:50	TAKEN 2 (DIG) PG-13 12:10, 1:25, 2:40, 3:55, 5:10, 6:25, 7:40, 8:55, 10:10
HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA (DIG) PG 11:50, 2:20, 7:20	TROUBLE WITH THE CURVE (DIG) PG-13 1:55, 4:35, 7:15, 9:55
HOUSE AT THE END OF THE STREET (DIG) PG-13 12:10, 2:40, 5:05, 7:40, 10:10	WON'T BACK DOWN (DIG) PG 1:35, 4:25, 7:15, 10:05
LAWLESS (DIG) R 11:50, 2:15, 5:00, 7:35, 10:15	
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THE DARK KNIGHT RISES (DIG) PG-13 2:00, 8:00	MARVEL'S THE AVENGERS (3D) PG-13 1:00, 4:00, 7:00, 10:00
DIARY OF A WIMPY KID: DOG DAYS PG 12:10, 2:40, 5:10, 7:35, 9:45	MEN IN BLACK 3 PG-13 11:55, 2:20, 4:55, 7:25, 9:50
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LOOPER (R) Fri. - Sat. (1245) 410 440 705 735 955 1025
HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA (PG) Fri. - Sat. (1140 205 235) 425 455 650 720 910
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