

HUMAN RIGHTS EXHIBIT AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING CONFERENCE at South Texas College

by Phyllis L. Evans

For the past five years, South Texas College, located in the US/Mexico border community of McAllen Texas, has hosted a Human Rights themed exhibition in conjunction with an annual Human Trafficking conference.

The art exhibit serves as an educational event that addresses global and regional human rights concerns. Emphasis is placed on opening both internal and external dialogues to confront the horrors and injustices that occur throughout the entire modern world. As a border community, through which many immigrants are willingly and unwillingly smuggled each day, this event is especially relevant to the unique problems faced by the people who live in South Texas. "Through the exhibit's conceptually and aesthetically unique artwork we hope to connect with viewers on an emotional and personal level," says Richard Lubben, who teaches art at South Texas College and serves as the exhibit coordinator and juror.

As the show gains notoriety, submissions have grown increasingly compelling with each year. The 2010 Best of Show winner, Jim Boden's *Interrogate #42*, oil on Mylar, depicts with bold gestural strokes a human backside enveloped in the somber darkness of what might be a windowless underground room. The figure reflects a harsh, singular light source, suggestive of a bright lamp used in interrogation. The paint appears to have been applied violently with large swatches of red paint slicing across the flesh. "I awarded Jim Boden's oil painting, *'Interrogate #42,'* the Best of Show award because of its powerful visual and conceptual impact. The brushwork has a raw and energetic quality that I think effectively conveys the brutality of the concept, but at the same time is controlled where needed. I also thought the Mylar polyester surface used was an unusual choice. I think it communicated a feeling of shredded flesh better than canvas or another surface," says Lubben.

The art exhibit is scheduled each year to coordinate with an annual three day Human Trafficking Conference, sponsored by South Texas College's Women's Studies Committee. This conference brings together practitioners, directors of NGOs, academics, activists and law enforcement

for the purpose of raising awareness of the crime of human trafficking and to explore the deeper causes and functions of human trafficking. Conference Coordinator Jennifer Clark teaches political science at South Texas College and serves as the Chair of the Women's Studies Committee. She calls human trafficking a "deplorable crime.... It is an abhorrent, grotesque crime in which millions of people are entrapped." Clark explains that the economic globalization of the post



Cold War era has resulted in a rise of the buying and selling of human beings. Poverty, social instability, lawlessness, gender biases, and ethnic hostility contribute to worsen the situation, resulting in greater and greater numbers of trafficking victims.

Several works in the exhibit open themselves to interpretations that deal directly with the issue of human trafficking. In Ellie Iranova's digital photograph *Broken*, a nude mannequin, disassembled and discarded, wearily rests her head against the edge of the frame. Her vacant, indirect stare conveys a catatonic state of hopelessness. A broken plastic leg clad in fishnet stockings and a cheap red curtain backdrop suggest the sexual use of a human who has been reduced to an inanimate object. *Broken* recalls Hans Bellmer's sadomasochistic and erotically charged dolls, but the emphasis here is on empathy for the figure that has been the depleted of her humanity.

Stephanie Meyer's mixed-media work, *Eye of the Beholder*, consists of a rusted metal door in which a small square hole, just two or three inches wide, is cut. A realistically rendered human eye peers through the hole, suggestive of imprisonment and the psychological "breaking down" of a trafficking victim. The viewer is left to wonder which side of the door is shown. Is it seen from the inside looking out, or from the outside looking in? Are we seeing the point of view of the victim or the victimizer?

By exposing and shining a light on human trafficking and other human rights issues, the conference and art exhibit combined to provide a unique learning experience for both the students and the faculty of South Texas College. With an audience consisting of presenters and attendees from around the world, the show and conference together reinforce the idea that human rights violations are global problems that concern us all.

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