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Odd Strange Disturbing Distorted Surreal

By Lisa Millegan

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Anybody who has written off the Mistlin Gallery as a conservative organization should visit again.

The Modesto nonprofit gallery, which recently banned high school student art from a youth art show for perceived gang, violent and sexual imagery, is now showing a multimedia installation about sexual language.

Titled "Semantic Frottage," the work is the centerpiece of the International Surrealism Festival exhibition celebrating the 90th anniversary of the start of the surrealism movement. The display includes mail art sent in from around the world, as well as edgy paintings and drawings by other artists.

Surrealism is known for its element of surprise and unexpected juxtapositions and non sequiturs. The movement dates back to

March 19, 1919, when, in Paris, Philippe Soupault, Andre Breton and Louis Aragon published the first issue of the surrealist journal Litterature.

The surrealism festival is sponsored by the Modesto Art Museum, a traveling organization that brings art into the community.

Jessica Gomula's "Semantic Frottage" features five panels of

fabric that show video projections of 1,000 slang words and animation of dancing figures. There's also a live video feed of people entering the gallery and MadLib games for sexual slang posted on the wall.

There are no age restrictions for viewing the exhibit, but a notice in front of the exhibition tells viewers to be prepared to be challenged.

"It's letting people know there are things that they in their personal viewpoint might not be comfortable with," said Henrietta Sparkman, a member of boards for both the Mistlin Gallery and the Modesto Art Museum.

Sparkman said it was an easy decision to allow the installation.

The gallery was more sensitive about the high school art because that was for a youth art show, she said. This surrealism festival is a professional adult show.

Gomula, 34, is an art professor at California State University, Stanislaus, and has shown her work in San Francisco and throughout the Bay Area, as well as in Sao Paolo, Brazil and London.

She earned her bachelor of arts degree in printmaking from the Atlanta College of Art and her master's degree in printmaking from Illinois State University in Bloomington.

Gomula said most of her work deals with sexuality and sexual paraphernalia.

"In general, it fascinates me how wide a variety there is in sexual experience," she said. "It's not all about procreation."

She thought it was interesting that there are only about a dozen scientific names for sexual parts yet there are hundreds of slang words. She found the 1,000 included in her installation through Google and other Internet searches, and said she could have found more.

She was amazed at the variety of sexual experiences the words reflect.



Viewers walk through the "Semantic Frottage" a multimedia installation that includes constantly changing projected images by Jessica Gomula featured at the Mistlin Gallery's International Surrealism Festival, March 19, 2009. (Debbie Noda/The Modesto Bee) - Modesto Bee - Debbie Noda

"People have wildly different perspectives on other people's bodies and their own bodies."

The Modesto Art Museum asked Gomula to make the installation for the festival. Her work fits in well with the surrealism theme because surrealism frequently deals with words and sexuality. She hopes viewers have fun exploring her work.

"I like that the audience has a chance to interact with it in different ways."

Sparkman said there have no complaints that she knows of about the installation. Many people have left positive comments in the exhibition guest book.

"It's about creating awareness and exposing people to different types of art," she said.

WHAT: International Surrealism Festival

WHEN: 11:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays until April 10

WHERE: Mistlin Gallery, 1015 J St., Modesto

ADMISSION: Free

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