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ARTS

News and Difference



by **MATTHEW SUMMERS**
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"Livin' XXL in Mexico." "Bush Utters Taunt About Militants: 'Bring 'Em On.'" "AIDS Cases in U.S. Increase." Those are just a few of the Washington Post headlines taped or sealed to the backs of the paintings that local artists Matt Sesow and Dana Ellyn Kaufman created for their "31 Days in July" project. And though the headlines may seem disparate, the variety is key. The news stories are the springboards for what, considered as a whole, is a quintessentially D.C. endeavor: art that comments on world affairs.

Sesow, 36, and Kaufman, 32, met about two years ago, at a showing of Sesow's paintings at the Cleveland Park bar Aroma. Sesow, a former software engineer, was already making his living as an artist, exhibiting in venues around the District and nationwide. Within a few months, they'd begun dating. Soon, Kaufman quit her job as a computer trainer at a local law firm and became a full-time artist as well.

At the behest of a local curator and friend, they devised the "31 Days" project, complete with ground rules: Sesow and Kaufman would read the front page of the Post every day in July, then paint a response to a story. By the end, they had created 62 paintings documenting a tumultuous month.

"One of the most interesting things about the project is the contrast between what he and I do," says Kaufman, whose works are smallish (a compact 11 by 14 inches) and precise, sometimes incorporating elements such as photographs or newspaper text. Sesow's style is more frenetic, and he works on a larger scale. "Even if we painted about the same article," Kaufman says, "we took different things from it."

A case in point: their responses to a story concerning the Senate Armed Services Committee's questioning of Donald Rumsfeld on the administration's handling of the Iraq occupation. In the side-by-side composition of Rumsfeld's Back-Pedaling, Kaufman satirizes what she saw as his retractions of earlier statements. One

of Rumsfeld portrays him on a unicycle juggling tiny American flags; in the other, he has literally pedaled backward, allowing some of the flags to fall from the air. A stoic senator observes it all.

Sesow's More Lies (With Iraqi Children in Bush Skirts) is an angrier reply to the same story: A frenzied, disheveled Rumsfeld clutches a dead bunnySesow's shorthand for lost innocencewhile (presumably) speaking deceptively about events in Iraq. Infant angels hover over his shoulders.

The "31 Days" paintings are for now viewable exclusively on the Web. "I couldn't be a full-time artist without the Internet," says Sesow, who credits online galleries for exposing his work to potential patrons who would otherwise never see it. He points to Guerrilla, a raw re-creation of a '50s-style poster for a King Kong-type film. "I sold that one to a guy in Italy," he says. "June 17 was the first day the term 'guerrillas' was used when describing the Iraqi fighters….Guerrillas, gorillas."

Next, Kaufman says, "We're talking about doing [a series similar to '31 Days'] about what wasn't covered in the mainstream American news."

"We just saw a story on BBC about how many Americans have 10 days of vacation a year, compared to the Germans, who have 37, 38," says Sesow. "Take a look at our leader, George Bush, who just took off a month: [That's] a painting right there." □Matthew Summers

"31 Days in July" is on view indefinitely at www.poeticinhalation.com/days.html. Kaufman and Sesow will also display their work at the Adams Morgan Days festival Sept. 6 and 7.