

UD's Blue Sky Project finds fertile field of art energy

editorial by Burt Saidel

There has been a most unusual invasion taking over our city. The "terrorists" are idealistic and beautiful young persons. If the White House had been alerted about this incursion, General Petraeus would not be sent from his new post in Afghanistan to rescue Daytonians from this overdose of optimistic creativity.

The program, named the Blue Sky Project, is not new. In its sixth year, now moved into the aegis of the University of Dayton College of Arts and Sciences and Arts Street. Finding there, a most fertile field. The structure, in a nutshell, is a place for high school students, six from Oakwood, to spend eight weeks fraught with collaborative energy. They are divided into five teams, each with a different focus.

Five professional artists come from highly varied backgrounds and areas of expertise. I was able to visit their headquarters in UD's Rike Creative Arts Building. What I saw was a critical mass of bright young people, all working with professional artists and college student assistants. If there were any preconceived concepts and plans, they were left at the door and replaced by free-wheeling imagination and ingenuity.

The teams work together each day with time out for total group activities. The artists and collegiate assistants live at UD's incredible Arts Street in order that their fever pitch of original thought and resulting action is not diluted. The final three day exposition, August 5-7, will bring all the teams together with their products.

Let me try to describe the projects. Lenka Novak, a Prague native now located in Montreal, is a visual artist who combines so many aspects of art that they defy cataloguing. Light joins film images, often cyber-manipulated, to something completely new and full of vitality. At the exhibition, several rooms will have the audience and the actor and imported images join into a pastiche. I am certain it will be an enigma, but a beautiful one.

Michael Casselli, now back in Yellow Springs after a career in New York, is a video and installation artist. His team is taking individual videos of their own world - house, neighborhood, points of interest. The goal - to tell you and us who they really are and where they would like to be.

Ari Tabei, of Tokyo and New York, is a performance artist. She augments her performances by creating costumes and stage devices made of scraps of paper. We saw her team busily wrapping and folding paper into shapes and forms which defy imagination. A huge cocoon will be the emergence of the entire team, also clad in their constructions, into a new world before our very eyes.

John Pena came from Pittsburg to encourage his team to "talk to nature." Hopping on bicycles, the students have explored here, there and everywhere. We saw them become trees weaving in a gentle breeze and then tormented by storms. They became rocks in fields. They send messages to nature such as, "Dear patch of grass, forgive me."

The artist's team which excited me most was that of Baltimorean Joyce Lee. Her topic, still a question in my elderly mind, is "Ideal World."

When we watched the team at work, they were videotaping a group, in beautiful colored shirts and caps, an almost military pose. They will become was a living montage of Goya's great protest painting, *The Third of May 1808*.

It has been called the first painting of the modern era. Gone were the restraints of religious art and conventional war. The guts of atrocious killing by firing squad depict the inhumanity of war. By using the young artists to become elements of the painting, the lesson, still unlearned by the world, will be safe in their hearts.

The program has so many performances. This week, three artists, program director Shaw Pong Liu with Joyce Lee and Ari Tabei, performed at the Art Institute. The three emerged from their own cocoon dressed in flowing white paper costumes. Slowly, they removed the paper and meticulously tore it to shreds. In the background, a projection of shapes, lines, colors filled the huge screen. When they were free of their costumes, the screen freed them of its shackles by becoming all black.

Meaning? Not important for this performance and for all the ones to be exhibited in August. The final three day exposition, August 5-7, will bring all the teams together with their products. What is important? These young persons have made new friends. They were free to express themselves unreservedly and to validate their creativity in joyous collaboration.

Now is the time of their lives to find passion, even for the most esoteric and easily dismissed ideas. Soon, the words of poet William Wordsworth, "The world is too much with us - Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." This meaning, written in 1807, the time of Goya's painting, will encapsulate them in the real world. This experience will provide a wonderful escape hatch.

Highlights yet to come: Shaw Pong Liu and dancer and master choreographer Rodney Veal will collaborate in the Schuster Wintergarden with musicians, dancers, Shaw Pong's classical violin and 45 yards of blue silk in *Of a River*. Date and time: July 22 at 7 & 9 p.m. Free to all!

The culmination will begin August 5 at The Armory. A preview party replete with libations and morsels will begin the three day exhibition.

Don't miss! It will be your chance to create your own escape hatch from the reality which is "too much with us!"