

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Visual Arts

Ethan Murrow's imagination guides "expedition" in art

By Sheila Farr
Seattle Times art critic

Hanging near the door of Ethan Murrow's exhibition at Winston Wächter Fine Art is a small portrait drawing of polar explorer Ernest Shackleton, his face clear-eyed and resolute. Shackleton is the type of heroic but ill-fated adventurer that inspired Murrow's show "The Freshwater Narwhal Hoax: The Orson brothers and their suspect marine biology." Murrow's imaginary saga stars brothers Banvard and Barnum Orson, a pair so eager to make scientific discoveries that they end up inventing them. A steadfast reporter tracks the story.

Of course this is an art show, not a newsreel, so the basic plot has to be spelled out in an artist's statement. The large drawings document a performance enacted by Murrow and photographed by his partner, Vita Weinstein. Assorted hybrid contraptions — faux scientific instruments, an ancient movie camera reinvented, a bowler hat (shades of the surrealist René Magritte) — are displayed as props among the drawings. There's also a short performance video that continues the story, more or less.

Despite the sometimes evasive story line, it adds up to a charming show. I especially admired the drawings — the exhibition's mainstay — for their precision, humor, low-key lyricism and broad vocabulary of marks. Obviously based on photographs, they read like overblown newspaper illustrations with their explanatory captions and catch-the-moment appeal. That spontaneous quality of the compositions belies the labor-intensive hand work it took to achieve them, feeding the concept of the exhibition. Throughout you sense the wrestling match between art and reporting.

The video doesn't hold together as well, and the gallery's cavelike acoustics make it tricky to hear. Still, it's easy enough to connect the theme of the exhibition to Shackleton and others like him, people who take huge risks and dare to spectacularly fail. "They worshipped Shackleton but failed to model him," the title of the portrait reads.

"All my characters tend to fail in the end," Murrow said by phone from New York. "I'm in it; I'm



ETHAN MURROW
"Banvard and the Arctic Re-projector," 2006, graphite on paper.



WINSTON WACHTER FINE ART
A video installation is part of the exhibit "The Freshwater Narwhal Hoax: The Orson brothers and their suspect marine biology."

self-critical; it's self-portraiture. But I never want to have complete failure throughout the story: I do admire what [Shackleton] was able to achieve."

It seems natural for an artist to appreciate such a heroic effort. Like exploration, art is about risk-taking and perseverance. Murrow says his own fear of performing for an audience led him to distance himself from viewers through video and photographic documentation in "The Freshwater Narwhal Hoax." Murrow's — or rather his alter-egos' — escapade narrows down to another preoccupation of artists: a quest for the nature of truth.

If you notice allusions to Moby Dick, Barnum and Bailey, Orson Welles, Magritte — they're all intended. If you think of firebrand director Werner Herzog's mockumentary about the Loch Ness monster, that's appropriate too, Murrow said: "I also watched a bunch of the little pieces people have produced about Bigfoot and Sasquatch. They are beautiful in a way the people that made them didn't intend: That pure belief. You could tell them anything that refuted their belief, and they would still go down the same road."

Exhibition review

"The Freshwater Narwhal Hoax: The Orson brothers and their suspect marine biology" drawings and video by Ethan Murrow,

10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays, through June 8; Winston Wächter Fine Art, 203 Dexter Ave. N., Seattle (206-652-5855 or

www.winstonwachter.com).

According to Picasso, art is the lie that tells the truth. But for Murrow, whose grand-

father was legendary journalist Edward R. Murrow, that paradox makes for inner conflict. The point of tension between the elusive truth that artists strive for and the heroic journalism associated with his family name spurs Murrow's artwork. "His work and his interest in truth-telling is something I think about a lot," Murrow said about his grandfather. "He's a hard guy to live up to. Some of what I am interested in is people who have the potential to live up to that model ... but just don't have the patience."

Nobody will look at "The Freshwater Narwhal Hoax" and accuse Murrow of not having patience — or at least obsessiveness to

burn. All but one of the dozen graphite drawings in the show, the largest of which is 78 by 144 inches, is dated 2007.

Sheila Farr: sfarr@seattletimes.com

Copyright © 2007 The Seattle Times Company