

# Interview with artist Jef Bourgeau about the threat to the Detroit Institute of Arts

“Art shapes the way you see the world”

David Walsh, Joanne Laurier  
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The threat to sell off major works from the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) to pay the city’s creditors has angered many residents of Detroit, along with artists and artlovers. The museum has one of the finest collections in the US, including works by Bruegel, Van Gogh, Van Eyck, Rembrandt and Velasquez, Diego Rivera’s world-famous “Detroit Industry” murals, a remarkable group of 19th century American paintings and a great deal more.

As part of the effort to defend the DIA from the financial barbarians at the gate, we arranged an interview with artist Jef Bourgeau.

Bourgeau is a Detroit-area artist who has been exhibiting his work—paintings, videos, photographs and other media—in the US and Europe since 1990. He frequently remakes old images and artwork, but not in a cynical manner, or simply to impress. Unlike many of his postmodern contemporaries, Bourgeau has a democratic, as well as a genuinely artistic sensibility.

As a commentator on his web site mildly notes, Bourgeau’s work has often “inspired provocation.” We first encountered him after a show of his at the DIA, “Art Until Now,” including references to various controversial works of the 1980s and 1990s (among them, Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, which caused an uproar on the floor of the US Senate), was brutally shut down by the recently appointed DIA director Graham Beal.

Much of Bourgeau’s indefatigable effort in the past decade and more has been aimed at the establishment of a contemporary art museum in the Detroit area. The Museum of New Art (MONA) has had various locations, including downtown Detroit and suburban Pontiac. Currently, Bourgeau and his colleagues are working on an expansion of MONA in Armada, Michigan, 40 miles north of Detroit.

Although, understandably, there is no love lost between Bourgeau and the DIA officialdom, the artist considers the downtown Detroit museum an indispensable part of the area’s cultural life and visits it “maybe a couple of times a month.”

We recently spoke in Armada.

We began by asking Jef about his history of showing work at the DIA. He explained that he first exhibited there in 1995 with a video installations, as part of “Interventions.” Sixty local artists were invited to display their work in a DIA gallery of their choice. “The smartest artists chose the contemporary galleries. I picked the Italian Renaissance space,” Bourgeau said. “My piece was a balance to ‘The Massacre of the Innocents’ by Butinone.”

Was that a happier experience than the later one in 1999, we asked? “It was a good experience. I realized then that they were very protective of every piece. They had wires hooked on to my pedestal,

the fish tank ... they talked about putting a pressure plate on the floor in case anyone got too close. That was the opposite of what I wanted: ‘Approach it, look at it.’”

*WSWS: So what happened in November 1999?*

“The DIA people had come to Pontiac and they liked what they saw, the crowd of artists who participated in my ‘Aperto’ show, and they asked me to put together a show, examining the 1990s. Graham Beal had been hired as director only two months before it opened.”

“They gave me three months to examine the 1990s, what I had been doing in Pontiac. There was so much to cover that I broke it down into 12 shows, a week each. I had 90 pages on what I was planning to do, which I gave them, but I don’t think they ever looked at that.”

Bourgeau continued: “I opened on a Wednesday. Some people came through, including a local art critic and her daughter. Then an elderly woman, who loved it. The first show was about the Young British Artists, along with Van Gogh, the cult of the personality. How the personality or the life of the artist becomes larger than the art. It was called ‘Van Gogh’s Ear.’

“The pieces were tongue in cheek. There was a reference to Serrano’s ‘Piss Christ,’ but it was an old apothecary bottle filled with apple vinegar. Most of the stuff I got from Gags and Gifts.

“It was referring to all the art pieces of the 1990s that had some impact. It was the religious material that caused problems, not the piece about racism. Beal said it might offend Christians. The DIA had just started their capital campaign for \$350 million, and he had talked to the trustees and promised them that he would never do anything controversial.

“In any event, they called me up to a meeting, and while I was at the meeting, they shut it down and locked the door. When I tried to pick up the work, they wouldn’t let me in the museum. I was public enemy number one.”

We turned to the present situation.

*WSWS: The city of Detroit has a budget crisis, and there’s the claim that ‘there’s no money’ for art, or health care, or education, for any spending on the public. There are trillions in the financial markets every day, so that’s a laughable claim.*

*The aristocratic principle means that if the population is going to have schools, museums, hospitals, etc., it is increasingly dependent on the super-rich and their benevolence. Society is no longer responsible for providing these elementary social benefits and institutions.*

*The notion that they would sell off art to pay the bondholders is horrifying to us. And to many people in Detroit. People think they have a right to this art, the right to culture. Our attitude is to defend*

*the museum, defend the art as a cultural right of the population.*

Bourgeau responded: “That’s what we’re trying to do at MONA too. It’s not so much about any particular space, but reaching the people and engaging with them about the art. The art world has become more insulated from the general populace. It’s more about the wealthy people going down to Art Basel in Miami on their yachts and buying up the work.

“Detroit needs the art. You look at any city and the first thing they promote is the art and museums. It is an important part of our identity and if we lose the DIA, what do we have left? We’ll just have the rubble.

“I first went to the DIA as a teenager, in the late 1960s, early 1970s. There were some exciting shows then, including contemporary shows. Art students were doing presentations and shows and films there. There was more energy then. I remember the show about modernism and ‘primitivism.’ I had a friend who said, ‘I could lie down on the floor for hours,’ to absorb the art, without being disturbed. He liked that.

“At that time, museums didn’t need the numbers [of attendees] to bring in the bucks. Now that’s changed. And they ‘Disneyfy’ things, to try and bring people in.

“Someone pointed out that 486,000 people went through the DIA in 2012, only a thousand more than in 1928. But, at the same time, the city’s population has probably dropped by half since then. The affluent people who were here have moved to the suburbs.

“I like the older work in the museum more and more, which I would have scoffed at when I was younger. I go more than I used to. It’s different every time. I see the special exhibits, or whatever I walk into. I went to the Rembrandt show, which was padded. I thought it was remarkable the DIA did a show of the Iranian-American artist Shirin Neshat, in this climate. I give them credit for that.

“The [Diego] Rivera courtyard is the centerpiece of the museum. I suppose they could rip it out and sell it to the Acropolis, or a museum in Ft. Worth [Texas], or somewhere, but I don’t think they’ll touch the Rivera murals.”

*WSWS: We’ve interviewed a lot of young people coming out of the museum, and ...*

Bourgeau put in, “They’re probably appalled, which is the natural instinct. You hope for that, if that weren’t the case, then we’d really be in trouble. An article in *Bloomberg* said, yes, the DIA should sell the art to Ft. Worth, it’s a growing area, they can do more justice to the art there. The article said Detroit can’t maintain its present collections, and it has no business collecting any more art.

“Who owns the art? The people? Then they should make the decisions.

“Nelson Rockefeller built a vault for his art and he let visitors go down every so often and look at it. No, society needs art. The first thing that gets cut is the art in schools. That’s what the kids need. At Oakland University years ago, they proposed to get rid of all the arts programs. Then someone said, wait a second, if you want to be a nurse or an engineer, you still need that creative side of the brain to operate, so keep the arts here. It survived.

“You need the arts in Detroit. If Detroit’s at its lowest point, then you need art to buoy the people up, so they are proud of what they have, so they have some vision. This is when you need art the most.”

*WSWS: They want a population that’s dumb and insensitive.*

“What’s going to happen? It’s a scare tactic.”

*WSWS: It’s establishing a principle. They’re saying, ‘You have no rights. No jobs, no utilities, no art either.’ What sort of impact does*

*art have on people?*

Bourgeau replied, “It changes their world view, it changes their vision, it changes the way they look at things. I remember seeing van Gogh’s ‘Wheat Field’ when I was a little kid. There used to be a beautiful wheat field off I-75 in Troy—it’s all tall buildings now—I’d see van Gogh. Art makes you more sensitive to your environment, to colors, to textures, to everything and everyone around you.

“Art shapes the way you see the world, hopefully in a better, more critical way. There’s less and less critical art now, because of commodification, the need for money to run these places. There are fewer and fewer opportunities for artists to express their outrage over what’s happening in Iraq and Afghanistan. Art was also supposed to be about that. It’s about beauty, but also a protest. It enriches your life.

“I have a friend who used to be bored by the DIA. But then one day he found himself in front of a particular painting. He spent some time there, then he left. He thought he’d been there 20 minutes, but he looked at his watch and he’d stood there for three hours in front of the one painting. That kind of experience ... is irreplaceable.

“Regular people, the ones who care about the DIA, they understand somewhere in their core that art is important in their lives. In a different way from a banker, who sees its monetary value, or investment value. The bankers are thinking of numbers, not of aesthetics, what the art and the museum do for the community. It’s a different mindset.

“There’s a gut understanding in a lot of people why we need art. You need that side of your brain, the creative side of it. It has become too much about money.”

Finally, we asked about the Museum of New Art and its future.

Jef said, “MONA has big plans. We’re setting up a think tank here, workshops. There are some great shows planned, reaching out into the community. Reaching out to the little guys, the people who are paying to keep the DIA open, and who have been under-appreciated over the years.

“The art schools are turning out art students, many talented students, and they’re paying almost as much as a doctor to go to school. They leave school and there are no internships, no opportunities here in Detroit. There’s no sense of art history, we have to organize the artists.”



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