



David Brewster's art at the Maryland Historical Society: foreground right, "McD's Playland Arrest"; center, "We All Should Be Grieving"; far left, "Colonel Sanders Looks On, Says Nothing."

# ART provocateur



ALGERINA PERNA/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTOS  
This is a detail of "Tiger 'Uprising," painted by artist David Brewster, who has an exhibit at the Maryland Historical Society.

## Md. Historical Society addresses contemporary issues head-on with works by David Brewster

BY TIM SMITH | The Baltimore Sun

At the entrance to "Structure & Perspective: David Brewster Explores Maryland's Social Landscape," a provocative exhibit that represents quite a departure for the Maryland Historical Society, two large paintings face each other.

Charles Willson Peale's 1791 portrait of the James Gittings family — father, mother, child — evokes the epitome of early American wealth, health and propriety. Mr. Gittings clutches a few shafts of wheat in one hand; through the window, his slaves can be seen tending the fields that produced that wheat.

The other work, "Peale's Triangle," also depicts a familial trio, but Brewster's, painted in energetic lines and bold colors, is an interracial male couple with their child. A Statue of Liberty-like figure raises one arm to bless the family; the other arm holds wheat strands. And in the same position as the window in the Peale piece, Brewster has painted a seething swirl of people depicting the 2015 Baltimore uprising.

Note, too, the vivid triangular background of pink at the center of See **BREWSTER**, page 4

# Paintings that confront the present world

**BREWSTER, From page 1**

Brewster's painting, referencing the gay pride symbol.

Family, civil rights, gay rights, violence, justice — a lot of issues and emotions for a single painting. But typical of the intensely focused Brewster, whose other works likewise tackle big themes, among them gender and transgender, poverty and crime, urban decay and suburban sprawl.

"We knew we were slipping into new territory with this exhibit and might alienate some people," says Maryland Historical Society president and CEO Mark Letzer, "but that's a risk we had to take. We have to embrace all history."

The Historical Society originally commissioned six paintings from Brewster on contemporary social and political matters, but he ended up producing dozens — so many that some are in the lobby, others in a stairwell. (The museum will retain six.)

"I took this commission very seriously," says Brewster. "I put everything I have into it. This is a teaching exhibit above all, less about me and more about making history come alive and light up the present."

In proximity with Brewster's paintings are fascinating objects from the museum's holdings dealing with many of the same themes.

"This exhibit very much reflects a new direction for the Historical Society," says Alexandra Deutsch, director of collections. "Showing work that is more relevant and tackles contemporary social issues is a change for us. This exhibit is full of connections between the past and present. David's work puts a new lens on our collection."

Texts on the museum walls ask people to consider their own perspectives on the material. Through interactive media, visitors can register reactions to a question asked repeatedly in the exhibit: "What's your perspective?"

"It's a very question-driven show," Deutsch says. "We didn't want there to be just one voice from the museum staff. This is an exhibit that everyone will experience differently and in a very personal way."

In deciding how to arrange the mix of Brewster's work and the historical material, Deutsch got an idea from the artist's methods.

"David paints from multiple perspectives," she says. "His paintings have different focal points and angles in them. I felt from the get-go that the exhibit space should have different focal points and angles, too. We tried to make the layout completely asymmetrical, but we had budget constraints."

Even so, there's still enough asymmetry that some visitors may be unsure of which way to turn. But any direction leads to something eye-catching and reaction-sparking.

Opposite a video monitor showing a beautifully filmed video documentary about Brewster's life, career and artistic philosophy is an unexpected sight — the full-sized wooden frame of a cabin, complete with fireplace and little alcoves inside. Here are displayed accomplished watercolors and oils by a young Brewster that capture his keen awareness of the world he saw around him in Baltimore County.

The urge to draw and paint was "in my bones and in my blood from the point of birth," says Brewster, who now lives in Vermont. "Growing up on [a farm on] Longnecker Road, it was not like I could walk down the street and play with my pals. I entertained myself. The [landscape] was my playground. I just drew and drew."

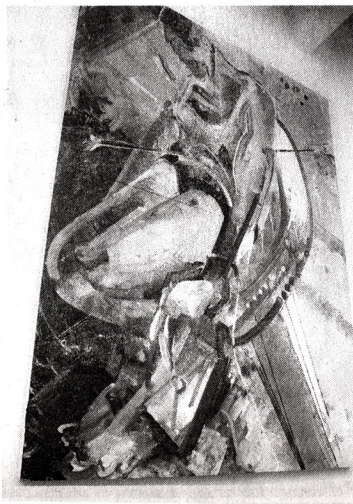
After earning an undergraduate degree at Maryland Institute College of Art in 1985, Brewster received a graduate degree at the



David Brewster's "Peale's Triangle," at right, is juxtaposed with Charles Willson Peale's painting from 1791 "The James Gittings Family."



ALGERINA PERNA/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTOS



B"St. Sebastian Brianna" shows a trans woman who endured suicide attempts during her painful transition.

University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, which would become his home for a decade.

"I made it a mission to go into the inner city," he says, "where I did hundreds of drawings and paintings."

Brewster, who went on to teach at high schools in New England, continued to develop his artistic approach. Impressionistic and expressionistic hints dot his mature oil paintings, which are typically done quickly on large surfaces (some in the exhibit are 4-by-8 feet).

Over the years, Brewster moved from traditional paint brushes to foam rollers; he also employs his hands to manipulate the paint.

"I'm a very muscular, athletic painter," Brewster says. "Sometimes I feel like I can't get the paint on the canvas fast enough. The paintings are pretty much executed in one sitting."

Brewster's sense of color, already heightened as a teen, is exceptionally vibrant, embracing turquoise, orange, purple and other strong shades. "I use colors that aren't taught in art school," Brewster says. "There's a certain harshness to them. They can be a little grating." The result is a body of work that practically bristles on the walls of the Historical Society.

## If you go

"Structure and Perspective: David Brewster Explores Maryland's Social Landscape" runs through October 2018 at Maryland Historical Society, 201 W. Monument St. Museum admission is \$6 to \$9. Call 410-685-3750, or go to mdhs.org.

A section that focuses on urban unrest includes the startling "McD's Playland Arrest" — an image of police arresting an African-American man in the shadow of the trademark Golden Arches. The texture of the dark green sky seems flecked with bullet holes (Brewster manipulated the paint roller to create the effect).

Artifacts from the museum provide historical counterpoint to Brewster's images of a troubled Baltimore — a cabinet from the early 19th-century Maryland Colonization Society, which sought to send blacks to Liberia; a sketchbook of captives being taken to a Baltimore slave market; and, on a more hopeful note, a disarming portrait of a free black Baltimorean fruit vendor, 1860.

Brewster's paintings of same-sex couples, including the massive "Two Women Gazing at a World of Spectacle and Fear," are complemented by such museum pieces as a wedding cake topper from 1888 made in Baltimore and a recently donated suit worn by a woman in a same-sex wedding.

There's a voyeuristic element in the exhibit, too. A 1930s peep show machine, for example, is placed near a specially built peep show booth which, through the eye hole, reveals Brewster's suggestive "Metal Teeth."

The richly colored painting "Cellar Slave" surprises with the outline of a couple engaged in sado-masochistic activity. "I have no intimate knowledge of that world, but, as a gay man, I do have intimate knowledge of seeking out affection in secret places, keeping things behind closed doors and feeling isolation," Brewster says.

The painter explores male cross-dressers (one sporting stiletto heels that mirror the shape of a church and steeple in the background) and sex workers ("Boy Toy" depicts a transsexual waiting for clients beneath a massive highway flyover inspired by the 695/I-95 juncture).

The melancholy "St. Sebastian Brianna" borrows the classic image of an arrow-

pierced body, but in this case "a transgender woman who had attempted suicide a few times," Brewster says. "The arrows represent the self-inflicted wounds."

A crouching male nude is the subject of a haunting work titled "Dude, You're a Fag," Brewster's response to homophobia he witnessed against himself and others.

And in "Legislated Peephole," Brewster takes on what he calls "the absurdity of the government peering into people's private business," specifically bathroom access for transgender people. He paints a prying eye's view of people using the facilities; a transgender woman perches, angel-like, on one man's shoulders. The artist flecks the edges of the circular surface with burnt amber that looks uncomfortably like — well, you can guess.

Other political topics jump out of paintings. One shows immigrant landscape workers engaged in what Brewster dubs "Weed-whacking Trump's Wall."

The perennial challenge of redevelopment in Baltimore inspired several dynamic works. During a visit to the city, Brewster painted one on site near North Avenue when he spotted a remarkable scene where, "in the midst of decrepitude and detritus," he says, "there was an elegant chaise longue."

A major target of Brewster's work is the transformation of once-pristine Baltimore County farmland into tracts for houses. "Pervasive McMansions," showing the early construction phase, becomes a kind of chilling, contemporary still life, portable toilet and all.

In "Vanishing Small Farm," Brewster captures in color and texture the disheartening sight of an earthmover encroaching on an elegant old home, which, painted at a tilted angle, seems about to slide off the land.

"I am really a poet," the artist says. "I think of my work as terrible beauties. I'm interested in revealing the darker side. I like to confront the harsher truths and realities as I see them, trying to make sense out of the confusion of our time."

The tension in Brewster's paintings makes the exhibit unusually engaging and challenging. The artist hopes that viewers will spend extra time with his work, thinking about the images and the issues that animate them. "Paintings," he says, "are not designed to have someone look at them for 30 seconds and click 'Like.'"

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