

At Real Art Ways

LIVING

Leibowitz: homosexuality and artistry are connected

By STEVE STARGER
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Cary Leibowitz is an artist. Cary Leibowitz is also gay. He unabashedly accepts both conditions in defining himself and says his art flows quite naturally from his homosexuality.

Leibowitz has serious fun when he creates his witty, sad and devilishly sardonic pieces. A generous and sassy sampling of his work is currently on display at Real Art Ways, Hartford's self-made bastion of cutting-edge creativity, in a show entitled "Picture This: Fried Porkchops."

Because Leibowitz has no problems with publicly proclaiming his sexual preference and because he uses male frontal nudity and dirty talk in his collages, some less-than-amused critics at the University of Massachusetts' Amherst campus recently tossed a brick through a window and painted anti-gay slogans with shaving cream on the walls of a gallery where Leibowitz's work was being exhibited during a Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Awareness Week observance.

Linked with Mapplethorpe

In the fallout from that outburst — the only one Leibowitz says he's experienced — the 26-year-old artist has found himself linked with the late photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, whose controversial retrospective at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford drew the largest crowds in the museum's history and brought a mini-storm of criticism from protestors designating themselves as guardians of public decency.

The history of the Mapplethorpe exhibit has become cultural folklore: how Mapplethorpe's frankly homosexual images compelled North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms to call for legislation to ban public funding of "pornography," how Washington, D.C.'s prestigious Corcoran Gallery cancelled the show under Helms's shadow, how the arts community felt a quasi-fascist chill in the American air.

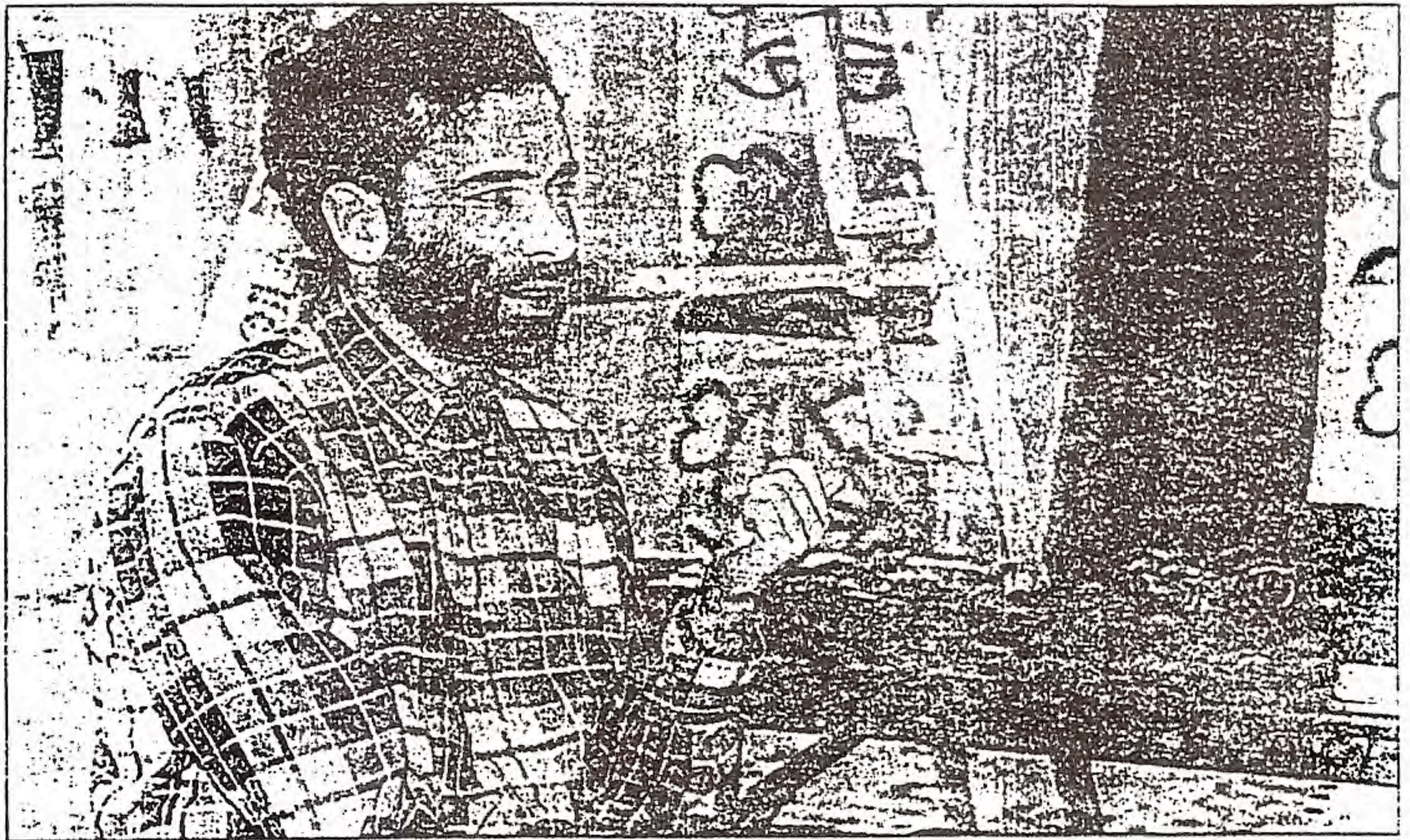
Leibowitz was out of the country when the UMass incident broke last November.

"At first I was surprised that they didn't do as much as I thought they did. I think they could have done more (damage)," he said.

Speaking during a break between lunch and the opening reception for his show at RAW, Leibowitz — who lives in Boston and who has exhibited internationally — said the Helms flap gave the Amherst thugs carte blanche to attack his show.

"The part I was really angry about was, if the whole Jesse Helms thing hadn't come up, they probably wouldn't have felt that they had the right to do that," Leibowitz said. "I think the Helms thing somehow opened the door to it."

Leibowitz also figures his "collegiate pennants" might have ruf-



Cary Leibowitz, who grew up in Trumbull, has a one-man show at Real Art Ways in Hartford.

John Dunlop/Journal Inquirer

led the crewcuts of some of the UMass jock community.

"They were more sarcastic toward their turf," Leibowitz said of the familiar triangular pennants, which, in the exhibit, bear the slogans "Homo State" and "Go Fags" instead of the alma mater's name.

"I never had anything to do with sports when I was growing up. I just thought it was real funny," Leibowitz said.

No problems expected

Paul Brenner, RAW's marketing director and gallery coordinator, attributed the UMass attack to "immature people." He doesn't expect any problems over Leibowitz's installation at RAW's space in a renovated factory on Arbor Street.

"Most people know what to expect before they come," Brenner said of RAW's patrons. He said about 150 people passed through Leibowitz's show when it opened on Feb. 23.

Art is political

Leibowitz thinks of his art as political to the extent that "my work is gay art because I'm gay. I have problems with people who say, 'I don't make woman's art because I'm a woman' or 'I don't make black art because I'm black.'"

"I think if you are something, you do make it, and whether it's conscious or not, it's part of your existence coming out."

Leibowitz began his existence in New York City but spent his formative years in Trumbull, a middle-class southwest Connecticut town where he described his suburban school days as "pretty

miserable, but nothing so tragic that's worth a neo-expressionist heavy duty painting; more or less, a banal sort of existence."

After formal studies at Pratt Institute and the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York and the University of Kansas, Leibowitz's work began to attract attention, and he landed exhibitions in Boston, New York, Dusseldorf and Paris. He is represented by galleries here and abroad.

Not avant-garde

Although his subject matter and methods might seem to put him out of the mainstream, Leibowitz doesn't see his work as avant-garde.

"It has a frame and a hanging device," he points out. "I wanted it to be kind of domestic. The wording is all kinds of adolescent slang."

But Leibowitz acknowledges a debt to the Dadaists and surrealists, who used found objects and non sequiturs to shatter the viewer's preconceived notions of logical order, to make one see through new eyes.

Leibowitz's pieces cover two walls and part of a floor, a riot of plaques with slogans carefully scrawled to look childish, photographs and magazine ads blended with nude male bodies and boy's room swear words — absurd concoctions that bring smiles and giggles, a kind of latter-day dada-fest impregnated with the gleeful anarchy of a Chuck Jones cartoon and laced with poignant tales of teen-age alienation.

Lining the bottom sections of the walls is a series of sheets of paper

inscribed with the words "I love" followed by the names of artists who have influenced Leibowitz.

A hilarious set of framed pieces printed to look like legal pad sheets contains handwritten lists of "Famous Jewish Baseball Players" like Julie London, Pearl Bailey, Jackie Kennedy Onassis, Buffy Sainte-Marie and The Supremes.

An ad for a pizza joint showing a slice dripping with cheese being lifted out of a pan is overlaid with the words "pizza face." Penny arcade photo strips of Leibowitz are crossed with Chinese fortune cookie homilies given a wry spin by the artist's mugging.

Elsewhere, a photographed chorus line of male nudes prances happily.

And just when you thought it was safe, if a little outrageous, to view Leibowitz, you come upon a plaque that reads: "There are 2 things I have 2 watch 4 the rest of my life: my weight and my racism."

The eye travels from that little kidney punch to the badly typed, framed vignettes describing overweight kids, boys who feel that somehow they are different from their classmates, and other recognizable "outies" who used to lurk in the dark corners of the playground.

A roll of wallpaper spread on the floor contains the tale of a young man who dresses up for a good time, has a flat tire and is taunted for his "faggot clothes" by teen-age rednecks.

Art to take home

You can take home some of the show, too. Leibowitz offers rolls of plastic bags, larger versions of the ones used to package fruit and

vegetables at the supermarket, on which Leibowitz has written little stories.

"It's really just trying to get the viewer involved," Leibowitz said. "I'm not out to shock. I think people come to an art show looking for open ideas, not really to be attacked or to question, but just let them question themselves."

To underscore his claim that he's not out to shock, Leibowitz points to some pop art wallpaper-like prints hanging on the wall, emblazoned with the disclaimer, "I will be nice."

"That was my slogan for last year," Leibowitz says.

If he's questioned why he uses frontal male nudity, if not to shock, Leibowitz quotes the Guerrilla Girls, a New York-based feminist arts group, that "90 percent of the penises in art museums belong to the baby Jesus."

What about acceptance by the mainstream art community?

"I have been, in my eyes," Leibowitz says. "I was in a mainstream museum in Germany...which had some of the elements of this show in it."

The bottom line for Leibowitz is that his work is being accepted: it's selling.

"The only thing I see is that I don't want to stay the same. I keep on trying to think of new ways to do things."

"Picture This: Fried Porkchops" runs through March 30 at Real Art Ways, 56 Arbor St., Hartford. The gallery is open to the public, free of charge, Monday-Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and by appointment. The public information number is 232-1006.