

## Danny Lyon— social artist

"What I'm trying to do is art... take a real situation and make art out of it," photographer and filmmaker Danny Lyon told about 250 students Tuesday night at Sheldon Art Gallery. Lyon's newest film, "Llanito," had just been shown and he was answering questions.

Part of "making art" is going beyond oneself into other worlds, he explained. "It's not a virtue to never go into your own world deeply, but it would have been dumb for me to go to New Mexico and photograph hippies when the Chicanos have been there for 2,000 years."

Hippies are something Lyon says he has no interest in photographing. "I've never liked to photograph my contemporaries, and besides, university students are the least interesting people in our society, because they're the easiest to deal with. Everybody is photographing hippies."

But social comment is important, though not to be confused with art. "Today's subjects are wildly social topics," he said. "You'd have to be insane not to be a social artist in our time."

However, Lyon said, there is a tendency to see his work as reporting or social comment and not for the art he intends it to be.

The viewer is left free to draw his own conclusions from the photographs, he said. Some see "Llanito" as an expression of the tragedy of the Chicanos; others as a piece of realism or art. "I didn't see any tragedy there," Lyon said.

"People should be left free to react in their own ways—it's closer to the way life is. Tragedy is a word and life's too complex to just say it's a tragedy."

Lyon has four books and two other films to his credit. One book resulted from photographs taken during the 1964 civil rights movement, another from seeing an old area of Manhattan demolished, one from pictures made of the Chicago Outlaws, a motorcycle gang.

His latest book, "Conversation with the Dead," is a collection of photographs taken during 14 months of everyday visits to Texas prisons.

"I could've made a movie in prison," he said, "but I was committed to the book and by the time I got done with it I wouldn't go back. I don't want to go back there agains. I couldn't begin to talk about it—I don't even like to think about it."

Most of Lyon's work has been done in very "strong" geographical areas: New York, Chicago, New Mexico, Nebraska, he said, is another such area.

"I've thought about perhaps someday working in Nebraska. It's an area of tremendous strength of the people and a very strong world of its own, its own place."

Other plans for the future include possibly assembling his best photographs over the last few years in a book—"kinda like my greatest hits."

This plan is pretty tentative though. "It seems very inappropriate with North Vietnam about to capture Saigon, for me to put together a book of photographs about America. It seems out of tune.... You've got to stay in tune with things."

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