

Artist shows hour-long video smile

BY DANELL MCCOY
Staff writer

The simplicity of a smile is something most people overlook. Not Charley Friedman.

Friedman's video, "One-Hour Smile" is being shown at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, 12th and R Streets, through January. "One-Hour Smile" takes the spontaneity of the smile and changes it to an act of determination and intention. Giving the viewer an ironic perspective on human emotions, the self-made video is fixed firmly on his own face as Friedman forces himself through the gamut of personal expression while maintaining a beaming smile all the while.

Although the video is referred to as an artistic film, Friedman stresses that it is just a video.

"I see video as being as close as you can get to utilitarian format," Friedman said. "It's cheap to use, and it's plain and forward. It's almost like a home movie."

During the sixty-minute video there is no talking and rarely any background noise. Friedman's face is his medium and fills the television screen.

"The video was painful for me to do physically. Your body assumes that you can't smile for an hour," said Friedman. "But after 20 minutes I knew that I could do it."

Through the video's first five minutes, Friedman's smile seems sincere and, complete with eye movements, gives the impression of surprise and delight.

But his smile soon wears thin. His eyes begin to squint and his face begins turning slightly red as he continues to hold his tight-lipped smile. At some points, it looks as if he is in considerable pain, and at some points it seems he is on the verge of tears.

Friedman stresses that what the viewer sees is the natural outcome of his physical strain and not acting.

Dan Siedell, curator of the Sheldon gallery, found the video to be hilarious.

"When the director and I first saw it, we laughed so hard we were crying," Siedell said.

Friedman agreed that some might have an amused reaction to his incessant, beaming mug. While watching the video it's almost impossible not to smile back at the vision of Friedman's face on the television.

"All my work has humor. Humor has a way of looking at the person and letting them see themselves in a different way."

Siedell hopes that people will appreciate the video as a serious piece and not as a joke.

"I think video art can be very pretentious but this is not. It has no deep, significant meaning."

Friedman, a native of Lincoln, works as a performance artist, a sculptor and a photographer as well. He received a BFA from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn. and a MFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston two years ago.

Recently, Friedman completed a residency at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Omaha and at the Skowhegan School of Art in Maine, where the video was filmed. He now works in Lincoln.


As a reaction to the pretensions of many artistic films, the video was decidedly simple both in production and content. The goal of the film was not to impress people with its profundity, but was crafted as a reaction to the ignorance of some people's philosophy.

In Friedman's words, "The song 'Don't Worry, Be Happy' is foolish and ignorant. You can't always be happy. It's not a part of your life."

"Your body makes that apparent."

"One-Hour Smile" can be viewed during normal business hours at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery.

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