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Ruben Rosario: John Wayne Gacy, murder, art and anger

By Ruben Rosario
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So, you want to add a conversation piece to your living room that will really wow guests, something like a painting?

Now, if you've got the cheese, you can go Warhol or van Gogh or Pollock. Or, for shock value, you can buy artwork created by one of the most notorious serial killers in American history.

The Arts Factory in Las Vegas recently sparked an uproar in both artistic and crime-victim-advocacy circles when it decided to showcase and sell a collection of John Wayne Gacy's paintings and other memorabilia linked to the serial killer.

Gacy was convicted in 1980 of killing 33 boys and men, many of them teenage youths he befriended and lured to his Chicago home. He raped and tortured many of his victims and buried most of them in the crawl space of his home. Others were tossed into the Des Plaines River. He was executed in 1994.

The art gallery obtained the collection from an individual and kicked off the exhibit, slated for September, with a lecture series this month by criminologists and experts on serial killers. The gallery's website depicts a painting of a skull by Gacy and has it priced at \$3,000. Other items - including paintings of clowns and Disney's Seven Dwarfs and portraits of Jesus, Hitler and Charles Manson, letters and audio recordings of the deranged killer - could fetch up to \$30,000 each.

Gallery owners stressed that the main purpose of the exhibit is to raise conversation about the artwork and raise money for a good cause in the

process. Every penny from the sale proceeds is slated to go to a charity.

But this is where it gets interesting, folks. The gallery named the National Center for Crime Victims

as one of the charity recipients.

The organization wasn't exactly pleased. Not only was it not contacted by the gallery, but it fired off a cease-and-desist letter in protest.

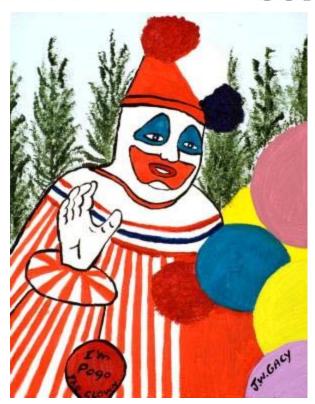
"Out of respect for the victims' families, we have not agreed and would not agree to accept any contribution that comes from the sale

of John Wayne Gacy's work, which he did while in prison for torturing and murdering young boys and men," Mary Rappaport, a spokeswoman for the National Center for Victims of Crime, recently told the Las Vegas Sun. "We believe that the idea of benefiting from an activity relating to such egregious and violent crimes would be in poor taste to the extreme."



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Goodbye Pogo is one of the artworks by serial killer John Wayne Gacy in the possession of the Arts Factory in Las Vegas. The gallery is planning an exhibit and auction of the collection. Pogo the Clown, painted while Gacy was on death row, was the Chicago man's alter equ. (Courtesy to Pioneer Press: Arts Factory of Las

The Contemporary Arts Center in Las Vegas also declined to showcase the exhibit after members of its in-house committee threatened to resign. And at least one relative of one of Gacy's victims implored the art gallery to destroy the collection.

"I'm calling out to the person that has those pictures: Please don't do this," said Annette Locorriere, a sister of one of the victims. "Please don't hurt us all over again. It was just so hard on our family. It was just devastating, and that's why all this coming back up, it just opens it all back up again."

Dave Schmid, author of "Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American History" (University of Chicago Press, 2006), empathizes with the crime victim group's reaction. "I fully understand it, because to them it's blood money, tainted money," said Schmid, an associate professor of English at

the University of Buffalo. "And they also believe the motive for the proceeds might be disingenuous, and they are not buying it."

But Schmid wonders how much different the exhibit is from an ongoing high-profile government auction of "Unabomber" Theodore Kaczynski's personal

possessions. Under a \$15 million restitution court order, the U.S. General Services Administration is conducting an online auction that includes the original handwritten manifesto that Kaczynski forced the Washington Post to publish. Proceeds will go to relatives of the three people killed and 23 wounded by Kaczynski.





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A painting of Elvis, done by serial killer John Wayne Gacy, is among the artworks in the possession of the Arts Factory in Las Vegas. The gallery is planning an exhibit and auction of the collection. (Courtesy to Pioneer Press: Arts Factory of Las Vegas)

As Schmid argues in his book, this is part and parcel of our culture's insatiable fascination with serial killers. "Murderabilia," as it's been dubbed, has never been more visible and accessible through the Internet. One firm sells serial killer trading cards. Another makes action figures of killers like Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy. There's even a popular cable TV show in which the hero is a "good' serial killer who whacks bad ones.

Gacy became the subject of numerous books and at least one TV movie I know of, starring Brian Dennehy.

And there's no doubt in my mind that the Gacy items will be sold, whether through a public sale or auction or through a less public venue. Perhaps the problem lies with us and what we choose to value.

"People think that people who buy this stuff are like weirdos, who live in basements," Schmid told me.

"But they are people like you and me. This may be no different than people who frequently watch shows like 'CSI.' We are fascinated by the fact these killers look like us and can go from normalcy to such an extreme (behavior)."

I don't have a problem with the exhibit. I do have a problem shelling out even one penny, even for a supposed good cause. I think I'll stick with the very boring Thomas Kinkade-like village scene. It goes with my living-room furniture.

ONLINE

- To learn more about the Las Vegas exhibit of John Wayne Gacy's artwork, go to johnwaynegacyart.com.
- To learn more about the "Unabomber" sale auction, go to gsaauctions.gov.



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