

Nutty as in fruitcake

Many art-lovers called me "Phallicist" and "barbarian" when I failed to appreciate the widely publicized body art exhibit that, consisted of a man laying motionless under a sheet of glass for 48 hours.

I'm as sensitive as the next barbarian, so I have tried to develop a greater awareness of this and other new art forms.

That's why I was part of the large crowd at the recent opening of Chicago newest art gallery — "Gallery 1134".

An exhibit of body art and other artistic "happenings" had been promised.

I IMMEDIATELY SPOTTED what I thought was the main exhibit, because part of the crowd was staring toward a corner of the spacious, tasteful gallery at a huge figure.

From a distance, the figure looked like, of all things, Dick Butkus, the former pro-football player. On closer examination, it turned out to be Dick Butkus.

Butkus admitted that he is not a patron of modern art, but a friend of the gallery's founder, Robert Billings, a writer-entrepreneur, and was there to celebrate the opening.



A slender young man approached Butkus and asked: "Do you know any of the gay quarterbacks?"

Butkus snapped: "I don't run a dating service."

Loren Billings, the gallery director, began pointing out some of the exhibits to me when I interrupted her by jumping. You would have, too.

A CRAZY-LOOKING WOMAN had come down the stairs. Her skin was tinted a sickly dark gray, her face was painted grotesquely, her hair was wild, and she wore a long, low-cut black gown that kept slipping in front because she was rather lean. She walked in a crouch and her head jerked madly.

And an incoherent, jabbering voice seemed to be coming out of her behind.

Ms. Billings excitedly whispered: "She is one of our 'happenings'."

"You're not kidding," I said, as the woman moved, crablike, across the gallery.

It was obvious that most of the people were familiar with this art form. Some studied her with academic frowns, pursed lips and cocked heads. Others barely gave her a glance.

Trying not to appear ignorant, I said: "Quite interesting. How does she project her voice from her rear end?"

Ms. Billings said: "She is wired for sound. You are hearing a tape of her voice, explaining her art. Unfortunately it is garbled."

"Well, the effect is still powerful," I said. "She looks nutty as a fruitcake."

Ms. Billings said: "She's very much intrigued by the story of Lactetia Bogis and is making an artistic statement about it."

"Ah," I exclaimed. "Of course! And it's a good thing she's making her statement here. Anywhere else, they might toss a net over her."

THE SPECTATORS BEGAN drifting up the stairs to the gallery's second level, where the main "happening" was to occur.

A closed casket stood in a roped-off area. Several intense young men and women sat on the floor, ready to operate slide projectors, videotape machines, spotlights and tape players. It was multi-media.

The spectators stood along the ropes, quietly staring at the casket.

"What's going to happen?" I asked.

"The artist is in the casket," Ms. Billings said. "He is going to come out soon."

Just then Ben Bentley, chewing on a foot-long pipe, walked in. Bentley is a former prizefight promoter, sports publicist, and has been described as a Damon Runyon character. Bentley thinks Damon Runyon is a street intersection. Like Butkus, he is a friend of the gallery owner.

He tried to peer over the crowd. "What are they lookin' at?"

"A casket," I said.

He looked sick.

His wife whispered: "He hates caskets. Anything to do with death. I have to drag him to wakes and funerals."

"Why do they want to look at a casket," Bentley asked, nervously chewing his pipe.

"There's a man in it," I said.

Bentley took a step backward. "A stiff?" he asked.

"No, he's alive."

"Oh, gosh," Bentley said. "That's awful."

His wife said: "He has such a horror. When we drive past a cemetery, he looks the other way."

THE CROWD BUZZED as the casket lid rose a few inches. A hand in a white glove dithered out, the way's Dracula's used to.

Then the lid popped open and a man, in dark formal clothes, sat bolt upright.

Bentley cried: "Let's go," and fled down the stairs. If art can create a feeling of emotion, Bentley had clearly been moved.

His wife, rushing behind him, said: "Really, when a cemetery lot salesman phones the house, he just hangs up on him."

The artist stood in the casket and tore off the burial garments until he wore a gray jumpsuit.

Then he proclaimed: "We are all becoming technological mutants."

IF SO, HE WASN'T muttering very fast. None of his technological equipment functioned properly. His tapes were garbled, the videotapes were blurred, and the slide projector's beam missed the bedsheet that hung on the wall.

"Slide 1," he shouted, like a Hollywood director.

A child was shown sitting on an elderly man's lap.

"That's me," said the artist, "with my grandfather. Now, slide 5!"

The same child was shown standing under a pine tree.

"That's me," he said, "standing under a tree."

Several people appeared baffled by the artist's meaning.

But as I followed Bentley toward the door, I understood.

The artist was of the generation that had been subjected to an educational experience called "show-and-tell."

He's still like it.