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Art exhibit may challenge, shock

Photographs of architecture are paired with those of male nudes.

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A risqué, homoerotic art exhibit will open this weekend on a stretch of street in St. Louis best known as a haven for antique-seekers.

Gallery owner Philip Hitchcock expects the "Body/Building" display to unnerve a few people, but he hopes to accomplish more by challenging the status quo. "If people are uncomfortable with those images, and they ask themselves, 'Why? What chord does that strike in me?' If they go that far, then as an artist and a curator, I have done my job," Hitchcock said.

The exhibition opens Saturday evening at phd Gallery, 2300 Cherokee Street, in Tower Grove Park. It pairs the black-and-white images by Ken Konchel, a local architectural photographer, and Jeff Palmer, a Palm Springs, Calif., photographer specializing in male nudes.

The parallels between the structure and landscape of the human body and the angles, form and relationships in architecture are striking in the images. "Art can't always be easy," Konchel said. "Sometimes it's important to be a little bit provocative." His clients, who include architects and buyers for the Ralph Lauren Home Collection, may not be used to seeing his abstract building photos juxtaposed with a naked man standing in a crucifixion pose. That image, titled "Crucifix," is reflective of the religious imagery underlying some of Palmer's work. This is the first time Palmer is displaying his work in a Midwestern city, and he's prepared for all sorts of reactions. "The couples photos I shoot are tender," he explained. "It's not prurient. It's not nasty."

Still, the eye-grabbing shot of two naked men clutching one another in sexually intimate position may raise eyebrows among some of the longtime business owners on Cherokee Street. Wayne Wright, owner of City Holidays, a high-end ornament store, says he welcomes the exhibition. But, he knows not everyone will be so welcoming: "Some of the old-timers gave me grief because (my store) is not antiques," Wright said.

In interviews, none of a half-dozen business owners on Cherokee had a problem with the exhibition. Betty Halloran, owner of Personalized Mementos, said "As long as it is done in good taste, I don't have any issues with it." Her only concern was that children not see it. Minerva Lopez, owner of the soccer store Gooolll, said that some business owners might have a problem with the exhibit but that "many of us will contemplate it with open eyes." Hitchcock is no stranger to controversy.

Regarding "Body/Building," Hitchcock readily admits that part of his motivation is political. He wants to normalize the male nude image in art, similar to the way the female nude is accepted. "Ten years ago, I don't know if St. Louis would have been ready for it. But now, I think we're more ready to say, 'Yeah, I'm willing to see something differently.'"

Where: phd Gallery, 2300 Cherokee Street.

The exhibition will remain on view through Aug. 11. Hours are noon to 4 p.m. Thursday through Sunday. 314-664-6644