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## 'Take a Picture/Tell a Story' Art Exhibit Opens at SMC Museum of Art

By Ryan McKinley



"Deodorant" Photo Robert Gumpert, courtesy Saint Mary's College Museum of Art

a child in the 1950s. He learned to develop film while still in grade school so his mother would buy him a camera.

He started his professional career covering the United Mine Workers of America strike in Harlan County, Ky., in 1974. He has continued to document social justice, labor movements and working conditions for the past four decades. "I have always related to topics touching on issues of class, race and power," Gumpert said.

The Saint Mary's exhibits feature Gumpert's black and white photographs unframed on the museum's grey walls. "We thought the images were very raw and emotional, and we didn't want anything to detract from that," Tynes said.

For "I need some deodorant. My skin's getting restless," the photos are candid and almost voyeuristic. Sometimes looking around corners or through doorways, they show the staff of John George Psychiatric Emergency Services in Alameda County. Interviews are presented as block quotes on the walls and credited anonymously ("Health Specialist 1").

"For the psych ward project I wanted to speak about what the work and place are really like verses what is depicted in popular culture," Gumpert said.

"Take a Picture/Tell a Story" focuses on documenting prison inmates. These photos are close-ups of individuals looking directly into the camera. A computer in one corner of the gallery plays the audio interviews, the voices echoing off the walls. When combining image and audio together, it is as if the viewer is sitting with the individuals. The intimacy of the images is very striking. Audiences can look into the prisoner's eyes and see the lines on their faces.

"Take a Picture is intended to confront people," Gumpert said. "To say those we lock up are just like us: they have kids, hopes, issues, bills and frustrations. With just a zig rather than zag you too could be where they are."

Gumpert hopes his work will show that "there is a need to appreciate and a need to correct. We, the USA, use the tools of incarceration to disappear our problems and 'the others' associated with them. For me the way a society treats those with the least of anything is a true barometer of the health of that society. The USA is getting sicker. But I see myself as an optimist and believe

The phrase "every picture tells a story" is given new meaning by San Francisco-based photographer Robert Gumpert in his first exhibitions in the United States, "Take a Picture/Tell a Story" and "I need some deodorant. My skin's getting restless," which will be on display through March 15 at the Saint Mary's College Museum of Art.

What sets Gumpert's photography apart, aside from the intimacy of the images, is the story. For every photograph, Gumpert conducts extensive interviews. The exhibits are a combination of the visual and the oral. If the audience only examines one aspect, they are missing the experience. "The shows are unlike anything we have ever shown here," said Kyla Tynes, the exhibition's manager. "We want people to have a reaction and take the time to read the work. These are very deep societal stories."

Gumpert became interested in photography as

change is possible."

Tynes sees the exhibit as "an opportunity for Saint Mary's and this community to bring awareness to issues of human rights, prisons, prisoner rights, and start a dialogue that had otherwise not been thought about."

For more of Gumpert's work, visit <http://takeapicturetellastory.com>. Also on display are Christo and Jeanne-Claude's environmental textile art and William Keith's paintings of Native Americans. These other exhibits operate as counterpoint, with their vast landscapes, to Gumpert's intimate photography.

For more information about the SMC Museum of Art, visit <http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/saint-marys-college-museum-of-art> or call the gallery at (925) 631-4379 during business hours.

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

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