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Romanian artist's wall sketches draw on controversy

ALICE THORSON, The Kansas City Star

Big house. Big car, Slim wife."

That's how Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi sums up the American dream after a decade and a half of visits to this country.

Based in Bucharest, Perjovschi (per-ZHOV-ski) is known for his take-no-prisoners wall drawings executed in black marker.

Over the past seven years, he's done them at art fairs and museums around the world, including a big one at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2007.

In September, Perjovschi filled the 25-foot walls of the Spencer Museum of Art's Central Court during a two-week residency at the museum in Lawrence.

Composed of multiple cartoon-y vignettes and brief texts that travel around the room's 200-foot perimeter, the installation is relentless in its lampooning of the controversies and contradictions of American life.

"Less is more," a man with a briefcase barks at a beggar.

"You know I was at Woodstock," states another man in a suit as he pokes a student in the chest.

A text poses the question: "Can Muhammad Ali have a cultural center two blocks from ground zero?"

A firm belief in the artist's responsibility to society drives Perjovschi's work. His scrawls and stick figures deliver his ideas with no concessions to formal elegance.

Acting on the museum staff's enthusiasm for Perjovschi's work, art historian Celka Straughn, the University of Kansas' Andrew W. Mellon director of academic programs, brought the Spencer project to fruition.

"His ideas seemed very fitting for a university setting. It's a conversation that generates conversation," Straughn says.

Perjovschi aims some of his most trenchant commentary at the culture of KU.

During his visit in September he attended a KU football game, Straughn says. He also had a tour of the Allen Fieldhouse athletics facility and museum, where he saw an older version of the KU Jayhawk logo.

Perjovschi immediately picked up on the school's push-pull between athletics and academics.

A grouping of stick figures labeled "Scientists, Artists, Academics," is accompanied by the remark: "Very serious people represented by a bird in cowboy boots."

An illustration labeled "Student Newspaper" is shown with a huge sports section and a few pages devoted to "other."

Perjovschi has a keen eye for misplaced priorities in the larger culture too. Under "The Way It Is," he portrays a small book and a big military tank.

And he seems thoroughly bemused by Americans' dueling obsessions with fast food and fitness, which he summarizes by pairing images of french fries and barbells.

Gay rights, racism, politics and war all are topics for Perjovschi's commentary.

A drawing of a T-shirt with the word "Hope" transformed into "Nope" is accompanied by the question, "Kind of quick don't you think?"

In a pairing labeled "Bringing Western Values," he juxtaposes a full-length burka with a minidress version. There is also a section of illustrations alluding to Abu Ghraib.

Born in 1961 in the city of Sibiu in central Romania, Perjovschi grew up under the repressive Nicolae Ceausescu regime. He was a teenager when the dictator embarked on a sweeping modernization program financed with money borrowed from the West.

Perjovschi attended art school in the early 1980s, a period of austerity and shortages as Ceausescu tried to pay off the country's debt. Romanians also lived in fear of surveillance by the secret police (Securitate) and government violations of human rights.

When Perjovschi emerged with a master of fine arts in 1985, there was no art market in

communist Eastern Europe, and in Romania, artists had to have their exhibitions cleared by censorship committees.

But, in Perjovschi's view, government censorship posed a lesser threat to artists' integrity than self-censorship, a tendency he had to overcome following the Romanian revolution and the execution of Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, in 1989.

"I had to learn anew how to speak and express myself freely," he said in an interview published in conjunction with his MoMA show.

In 1991, Perjovschi began contributing political drawings to the independent weekly magazine *Revista 22* in Bucharest. The drawings helped establish his voice and reputation, which also got a push from the activities of the Bucharest-based Contemporary Art Archive. The CAA, established by Perjovschi and his wife, artist Lia Perjovschi, frequently sponsored lectures by visiting artists and curators from London, New York and other art centers.

By the mid 1990s, Perjovschi was receiving invitations to appear in international group shows, and in 1999 he represented Romania in the Venice Biennale.

Perjovschi believes "dialogue is essential in society." Over the past decade, he hasn't shied away from criticism or controversy. He has tackled the legalization of abortion in predominantly Catholic Portugal and recorded opposing views of the Second Gulf War in a 2003 chalk drawing in Essen, Germany.

He maintains a sense of humor about stereotypes of his native Transylvania (a historical region of Romania).

"My name is Perjovschi," reads a text entry. "I am a (very) distant relative of (Constantin) Brancusi. I come from Dracula land."

Constant travel and exposure to many perspectives have honed Perjovschi's wit and wisdom. Shuttered in his country until Romania opened to foreign travel in the early 1990s, he's a global artist now.