

'Big Bil-Bored' backer doesn't get the message

By Eric Zorn

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The fantasy rube from Berwyn in the newspaper ad squints at an enormous wedge of castaway appliances buried in concrete and says, "Looks like a pile of junk to me."

"It is a pile of junk," answers the art historian and educator from California.

"Yeah?" says the rube. "I thought they were telling us it was some kind of 'art'."

"Maybe it is some kind of art," says the art historian, and he is on his way. The ensuing Socratic discussion, offered up in a recent full-page ad in the near western suburbs, leaves the hapless and thoroughly invented Berwynite stammering and realizing the error of his Philistine ways.

"Maybe so, maybe so," he says near the end, responding to a suggestion by the art historian that the sculpture in question, "Big Bil-Bored," is meant to remind us that "some changes need to be made in what we think is important."

The art historian concludes that "this junk art is an example of 'the medium is the message'."

"Yeah," says the defeated yet newly enlightened and quite possibly even grateful Midwesterner. "Maybe so."

The ad was signed by David Bermant, the New York- and California-based owner of Cermak Plaza Shopping Center and modern-art fancier. The ad appeared this month, four days before Bermant sent in pollsters from the Gallup Organization to ask shoppers if they want to keep Big Bil-Bored, a 60-ton, three-story creation frequently compared to a pork chop filled with garbage that looms at the corner of Harlem Avenue and Cermak Road.

Bermant said Monday that Gallup has not delivered results yet, but he will get rid of the \$25,000 sculpture if more than 50 percent of respondents give it thumbs down. He said the artist, Nancy Rubins, has told him she will not allow the sculpture to be moved. The only way to get rid of it is to destroy it.

Bermant has waffled on the role of public art-critics in blue-collar Berwyn. In a 1989 interview, he said he "would be willing to have Berwyn hold an election and let the people say take it down or keep it up. But then, after the people voted against the sculpture in an advisory referendum in March of this year, he said it didn't count.

"It was just a primary election," he explained Monday. "It was a small turnout."

As we await the results, we have time to dress Bermant in rube's clothing and invent our own fictional conversation with him confronting something he does not appreciate.

He begins: "*It looks like an enormous chunk of rotting cheese.*"

It is an enormous chunk of rotting cheese.

"*Yeah, well what's it doing on my front lawn with a sign stuck in it saying 'Work of Art?'*"

Maybe it is some kind of art.

"Come on! It's rotten cheese and it's art?"

Well how about this: It's made out of clotted milk, which is not art, just like the "Old Masters" paintings were made of canvas and paint, which were not art. But what they did with it turned it into art.

"Does this imaginary cheese scenario have any connection to my maintaining a pigeon-infested, vertical landfill at the unofficial gateway to Berwyn?"

You're catching on. In modern times, as your ad says, artists use a lot of different materials and new and surprising methods to put across their ideas and messages.

"So what's the story with this wad of cheese?"

What do you think? How does it make you feel?

"Depressed. Irritated. Kind of mad."

Your dummy Berwynite feels exactly the same way about Big Bil-Bored.

"But if he would read the plaque on the base, he'd know that it 'awakens us to the very life we are living'."

So does the smell of bad cheese on a fall morning. What do you suppose the message here might be?

"Maybe that many of the people of Berwyn feel about Big Bil-Bored the way I would feel about having a monstrous, decaying hunk of cheese at the end of my front walk?"

But you knew that, didn't you? Your own ad recalls that nearly 80 percent of Berwyn voters cast ballots against the sculpture.

"Maybe so, maybe so."

You just had to sort it out and think about it a little, didn't you? The medium truly is the message, isn't it?

"Yeah. Maybe so."