MICA show tackles intolerance

By Mary Carole McCauley
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The photograph of the Washington-based artist Mary Coble, clad only in a pair of plain white underwear, is quite literally, blood-draining.

Etched into her back and legs and arms with a dry tattoo needle are "Martha," "Patrick," "Jorge" and 455 other names — each one indicating someone with a nontraditional sexual orientation who was murdered as the result of a hate crime. The names cover nearly every inch of Coble's flesh, from her neck to her feet.

The artist pressed a rectangle of white paper over each tattoo, and the reverse images, traced in the iron-rich brown of Coble blood, cover a nearby wall.

Coble was horrified to learn during her research that "especially with gays, when people were murdered, their murderers carved specific names into their bodies — names like 'dyke' and 'faggot'" she said in a 2005 article in The Washington Post. "Having these names tattooed on me is paralleling what happened to these individuals."

The piece, titled "Note to Self," is among the 44 objects and installations making up "The Narcissism of Minor Differences," an exhibit that opened last week at the Maryland Institute College of Art.

The show examines the forms that intolerance takes. Its title is derived from that happy phrase-maker, Sigmund Freud, who wrote in "Civilization and Its Discontents" that it is the often tiny variations in human habits and appearance that cause people to despise their neighbors.

"Intolerance of others is as common now as it has ever been," co-curator Christopher Wittey says, "perhaps even more so, with the advent of the Internet and its relatively anonymous accessibility. The exhibition is not conceived to shock. Our hope is that the powerful works and the ideas behind them will provoke response and initiate dialogue."

Wittey was an administrator at MICA before taking a job as dean of the Maine College of Art. He and Gerald Ross, the Maryland College's director of exhibitions, have been working for two years to put together "The Narcissism of Minor Differences."

(The main exhibit will be accompanied by three solo shows running for one month each by MICA alumni Joseph Lewis III, Marc Andre Robinson and Valerie Pitalo.)

The works on display include a 19th-century woodcut from "The Disasters of War" series by renowned Spanish artist Francisco de Goya, a deceptively simple glass wall plaque reading "Ich bin Jude" ("I am a Jew") by conceptual art pioneer William Anastasi, and sculptor Melvin Edwards' brutally compelling metal face masks from his "Lynch Fragments" series.

In addition, several historical objects are on display: a machine, probably from the 1950s, used to deliver electroshock therapy to "cure people of homosexuality," plus a series of eugenics photographs from Nazi Germany purporting to contrast the Aryan ideal with the physical characteristics of those deemed misfits.

And, closer to home, are a series of "before" and "after" photographs taken from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which was founded in 1879 in south-central Pennsylvania. The snapshots purport to show the progress of the students moving toward civilization, so the "before" pictures are frequently of young men and women in Native American regalia, while the later shots depict them in short hair and wearing business suits. Even their skin tone appears to have lightened.

"The 'After' photos are almost completely devoid of personality," Ross says. "They've taken everything away from them."

Though the artwork and artifacts uniformly have a strong point of view, the curators say they picked only those that eschew manipulation.

"One thing we're very proud of is that we avoided propaganda," Ross says. "All the works either ask questions, or they have many layers that feed into a spirit of artistic inquiry."

And indeed, the exhibit makes the point that 100 percent tolerance not only is impossible, it's probably undesirable. A perfectly tolerant human being would be a blank slate, bereft of quirks, tastes, opinions and values.

"All tolerance begins by saying, 'I'm not that,'" Wittey says.

"That's why college campuses aren't very tolerant places. When you're in school, it's not important to be a tolerant person. You're defining yourself, defining who you are as a person and an artist."

Of course, such defining can result in further self-examination. A case in point is artist Philip Guston's black-and-white sketch-
es known as "The KKK Portraits." The hooded figures clearly are evil, as is evidenced by a tank in the background and a cloud that seems to point an accusing finger.

But Whitley is convinced that the figure under the robes is Guston himself. The cigar that the figure is smoking, the curator says, is a dead giveaway.

"I've started to think of 'The KKK Portraits' as self-criticism," Whitley says. "Guston was very aware of his Jewish identity and of the Holocaust. He changed his name from Philip Goldstein.

But these works were created in 1968 during the civil rights movement. He seems to be saying that if an artist stays in his studio when there's war going on, producing new fodder for the machine, if he's not doing anything to stop it, he's part of the problem."

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If you go

"The Narcissism of Minor Differences" runs through March 13 at the Maryland Institute College of Art, 1303 W. Mount Royal Ave. Free. Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays; noon-5 p.m. Sundays. Call 410-669-9200 or go to www.mica.edu.

This still from Roe Rosen's "Hilarious" video is part of MICA's new show, "The Narcissism of Minor Differences."