

Sit on 'the chair' and stare if you dare

Art creation shows how we are slaves to vanity

BY CHARLES RUNNELLS

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Michael St. Amand started showing friends "the chair" about a year ago.

At first, they didn't know what to think of his creation: three mirrors perched on a curvaceous vanity table — plus leather handcuffs and chains binding the beholder to her fur-covered seat.

"They were speechless," says St. Amand, 51, of Naples. "They didn't know what to think about it."

St. Amand realized he might be onto something.

And he started doing some thinking, himself.

Now that wooden table — cheekily titled "Slave to Vanity" — has led to an entire art show with the same name. The exhibit is a fundraiser for Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center in downtown Fort Myers.

St. Amand and six other artists offer their unique takes on beauty, narcissism and how society makes us feel about ourselves. Five essayists also wrote on the subject, and they'll read their essays aloud at tonight's opening reception.

A local manufacturer even concocted high-end cosmetics for the event (filled with artificial snake



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"Parisian Platitudes" by Michael St. Amand

venom, peat extract and gold and diamond particles, no less). The cosmetics sell for \$150 each, and profits go to the art center.

"There are hundreds of thousands of products like this coming out all the time," explains Cynthia Rager, owner of the Fort Myers cosmetics company IntegraDerm. She wanted to satirize those products, their high price tags and the vanity that gets people to buy them in the first place.

"We're creating the illusion of how we want to be, and how we want to look," Rager says. "Even though this is how I make my liv-

IF YOU GO

What: Opening reception for "Slave to Vanity," an art show and fundraiser for the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center

When: 6 p.m. to at least 10 p.m. today (the event is part of the monthly Art Walk). The show continues at the art center through Jan. 14.

Where: The Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center, 2301 First St., downtown Fort Myers

Admission: Free

Info: Call 333-1933 or go to sbdavis-artcenter.com. There's also a show

Web site at slavetovanity.net

Artists: Michael St. Amand, Ed Chappell, Lawrence Voytek, Sherry Rohl, Jim Kreiger and Michael Beauchemin

Essayists: John Fenning, Morris Zimmerman, Terry Tincher, Richard L. Tooke and Jenny Higgons

Music: Abstract, performance-art music by Sonic Combine

Products: Cosmetics and hand-held mirrors will be sold opening night and online. Proceeds go to the art center.

ing, we still need to reorganize and prioritize and laugh at ourselves a little bit."

Other artists in the show include St. Amand's friends Ed Chappell, Lawrence Voytek, Jim Kreiger and Sherry Rohl.

Rohl contributed a painting of a Tennessee walking horse — a performance horse forced to wear hair extensions, lightweight chains and elevating pads on its hooves (the horse equivalent of high heels).

"There are a lot of pretty extreme things they do to these horses," Rohl says. "Not unlike what they do to people."

St. Amand didn't know it when he first built "the chair," but vanity turns out to be a fertile artistic subject.

He created several new paintings for the show, plus two more vanities outfitted with mirrors, chains, chokers and handcuffs. At tonight's show, visitors can volun-

teer to get chained into one of them.

"It's a whole interactive experience," St. Amand says.

But don't get the wrong idea. The leather and chains have nothing to do with S&M.

They represent a different kind of bondage — our slavery to low self-esteem and impossible beauty standards.

Even professional models haven't liked sitting in the chairs for more than a few minutes, St. Amand says. Stare long enough at yourself, and you'll always find flaws.

"People have problems just being with themselves," he says. "They never think they're good enough."

"You can't get away from yourself, no matter what you do — makeup, collagen injections, implants. After awhile, you can't get away from who you are."