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ART

Drawn to the badge

GARY FRIEDMAN *Los Angeles Times*

FRED WILSON

JOHN KIELTYKA

JOHN KIELTYKA

A UNIFORM APPROACH: *Painter John Vince, top photo, stands guard at the Huntington, where he finds "paradise when we come to work." Above, "Guarded View," 1991, a work by former guard Fred Wilson, captures what he found to be the job's anonymity.*

IN SYNC: *John Kieltyka photographed fellow artists on a Seattle museum guard staff including, bottom, Karen Kirchhoff.*

At museums, guard uniforms often cloak painters, photographers and other practicing artists. Even if it's not a short cut to the permanent collection, there are benefits to keeping an eye on masterpieces.

By DIANE HAITHMAN
Times Staff Writer

BOSTON graphic artist Karl Stevens, 27, has found a way to get his foot in the door of the museum world — the back door.

Stevens, who dropped out of two prestigious art schools to pursue his career his own way, is also a guard for the Harvard University Art Museums. His favorite parts of the job are the Tuesday and Thursday late shifts, 7:30 to 11 p.m., when he can be found fortifying the back entrances of the Fogg Art Museum and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, respectively.

Stevens — who has self-published a graphic novel about youthful slackers, "Guilty," and whose comics are regularly featured in the Boston Phoenix — has a studio in Boston, but the guard booth provides another sort of studio. "I can actually work on my projects here, unbeknownst to my bosses," he jokes, then adds hastily, "Nah, they know — it's not a big deal."

Stevens is hardly unique in possessing a sketch pad and a security badge. When it comes to the people who guard art, visitors might be surprised to find that in more than a few cases, underneath that stern visage and pressed uniform there beats the heart of an artist.

No one seems to keep statistics on what percentage of museum guards may be artists. As Stevens jokes, it's not like there's an association of guard-artists or an Internet chat room called, say, "artcops.com."

Still, guards and their supervisors are quick to report that the incidence of artists among the guard ranks is high enough to be more than coincidental. At museums in [*See Guard, Page E32*]

LIKE-MINDED: *Kieltyka captured fellow guard and musician Brian Wallace in uniform. "It was actually more unusual to find somebody who wasn't involved in art at all being a guard," Kieltyka says.*

JOHN KIELTYKA

For some, it's a job in art — with security

[*Guard, from Page E25*] California and nationwide, artists are very much a part of the security corps.

Many say they take the jobs because they want to lose themselves among objects of beauty. For some, like Stevens, a job as a guard may serve the same purpose as a mailroom position at the William Morris Agency for a Michael Ovitz wannabe — a steppingstone into the upper echelons of the art world. "I'm completely shameless," Stevens offers. And it appears to be working: The Fogg's former print curator, Marjorie Cohn, bought some of the original pages of "Guilty" that feature scenes at the Fogg and has loaned them to the museum, where they are held in the archives.

A show of force

CREATIVE types attracted to the work of protecting cultural treasures don't all come from the visual arts; actors, dancers, poets and rock stars also find their way into the ranks. Indie rock musicians David Berman, a member of the band Silver Jews, and Stephen Malkmus, a founder of the now-defunct California alternative rock band Pavement, both worked as guards at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in the early '90s.

Berman, who is also a writer, penned a stream-of-consciousness essay called "Clip-On Tie: The Diary of a New York Art Museum Security Guard," published in 1995 in the Chicago-based literary journal the Baffler: "Sometimes, when a beautiful Italian girl wanders into an empty gallery I fantasize about walking over and kissing her on the neck. When she turned around and saw I was a guard, I would straighten up and whisper: 'no kissing allowed,' " Berman wrote.

John Kielityka, a Seattle musician and artist, was a guard at the Seattle Art Museum in the early '90s and found his fellow guards such an eclectic bunch that he was inspired to create the photo series "Guard This Entry," shooting his compatriots during lunch breaks.

"In my experience, it was actually more unusual to find somebody who *wasn't* involved in art at all being a guard," Kielityka says. "Everybody had all this education and all these great ideas, and the common thread was that everybody wanted to be around the art."

Michael Raysson, a photographer, painter and collage artist who has stood guard at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for more than 15 years, says artists make the best guards. "We take our jobs seriously compared to other people, because we appreciate the paintings, and guarding the paintings, they are things that we have a feeling for," Raysson says. "And if someone wants some information on a painting, we tell them."

Jim Knipfel, a columnist for the New York Press who once guarded at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in that city, might tend to disagree. "With artists, you get attitude," he observes with a laugh.

When the Guggenheim reopened after its restoration project in 1992, Knipfel was among a group of artists hired as part of an effort to provide art-savvy guards who could not only see to security but answer visitor questions. "We had writers and filmmakers, painters and sculptors — it was an amazing crew of people," Knipfel recalls. "They gave us these nice Armani suits with padded shoulders and silk ties instead of guard uniforms. It was ridiculous. We looked like mobsters — really geeky mobsters.

"Problem was, we weren't exactly the world's best security personnel, and we enjoyed the occasional practical joke."

The artists also tended to use the notebooks they were given to record security infractions as sketchbooks or for jotting down their interior monologues. "So after two or three years, they got rid of us and hired just regular rent-a-cops to take our place."

By the time the job ended, Knipfel had had enough of patrolling the Guggenheim's ramped hallways anyway: "It was a hellish job. Not only are you standing on your feet in one spot for eight or 10 hours, at the Guggenheim, you are at an angle."

Guggenheim spokeswoman Betsy Ennis said via e-mail that "they wore nice suits, but not Armani . . . details of how the program ended are not recalled, but we are certain that they were not all 'dismissed'; rather, the Museum transitioned to a much more traditional guard program."

The Guggenheim recently initiated a program called "Ask a Gallery Guide," in which museum guards, distinguished by an exhibition-related badge, are trained to answer visitor questions and briefly discuss particular artworks.

Los Angeles Police Det. Don Hrycyk, who heads the LAPD's art theft detail, says that using artists as guards "sounds like a shaky proposition. Most of the time it's just aggravation — you have to deal with kids who act like kids, like the one who stuck bubble gum on that painting at the Detroit Institute of Arts." (In late February, a 12-year-old boy stuck a wad of gum to a $1.5-million painting called "The Bay" by Helen Frankenthaler, leaving a stain the size of a quarter.)

Hrycyk continued: "But in an emergency situation, what decision is that person going to make? You saw it in the Isabella Gardner robbery that occurred in Boston, where they used part-time people who are not well-trained, and the results were catastrophic."

Hrycyk referred to an infamous late-night incident March 18, 1990, at Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. At 1:24 a.m., a buzzer rang at a museum entrance. One of two guards on duty responded and saw what he thought were two Boston policemen outside, and let them in. That guard and his colleague were overpowered by the "policemen," actually burglars in stolen uniforms. The intruders tied up the guards and launched a looting spree that included ripping Rembrandts from their frames and also making off with works by Vermeer, Degas and Manet. The incident made the FBI's list of Top 10 Art Crimes, released in late 2005.

Hrycyk believes in the power of the uniform, rather than Armani. "If you are a potential crook and you want to steal something, your decision whether to complete that is dependent on your perception of the skill and experience of the security," he says. "The whole thing is deterrence: You want people to enjoy themselves and have access, but at the same time you want to let the public know that you consider the contents of the museum to be treasures."

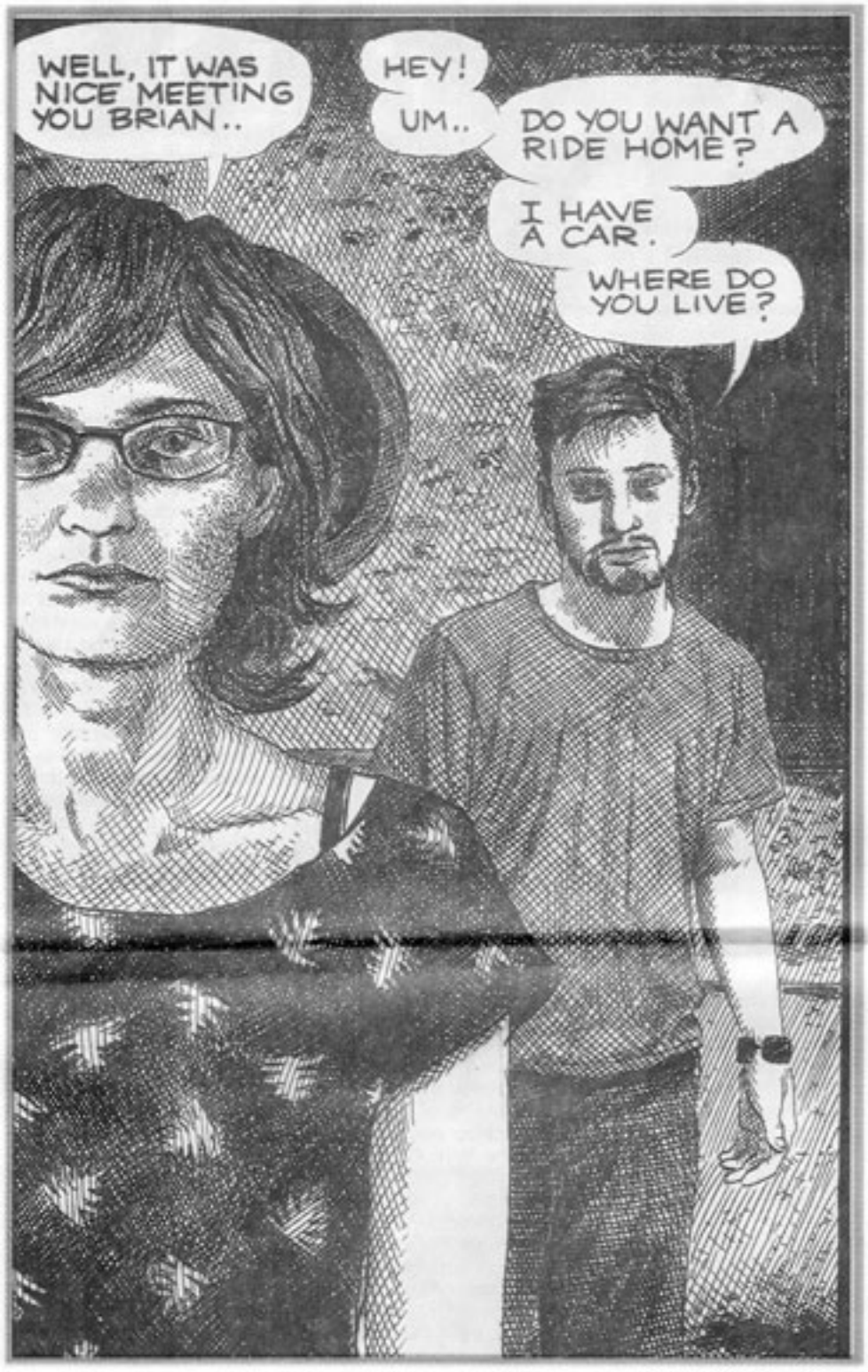
Bob Combs, director of security for the J. Paul Getty Trust for 19 years — and a trumpet player — believes that artists can wear the uniform as well as anyone. He says that the Getty security staff of several hundred includes more than 25 artists and other creative sorts, among them a classical guitarist, a bass player, a graphic artist, a stand-up comedian, a chef, a filmmaker, a " 'zine" publisher and a doll maker. Works by some artist-guards have been displayed in the biennial "Getty Underground" exhibition of staff art. Combs says the Getty succeeds with artist-guards because all receive extensive security training — the opposite approach to that of museums that hire security professionals, then give them a crash course in art. "We don't look for people with strictly security backgrounds, but customer service skills; for many people who visit us, the security person is the first and last person they see; they are like ambassadors," Combs says.

Ranks studded with students

IN Southern California, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art and the San Diego Museum of Art all use professional security companies that may randomly assign officers to museums in the same way they might to a factory or a storage facility. The San Diego museum's former director of administration, Heath Fox, now assistant dean of arts and humanities at UC San Diego, says the museum's security company, Guardsmark, takes into account the need for a public service orientation but doesn't specifically send artists to the galleries.

Even museums that count artists among their guards say they don't necessarily recruit them. Rather, good cops or bad cops, artists show up among the job applicants. The Norton Simon Museum, for example, attracts students and graduates of nearby Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. At the UCLA Hammer Museum, about one-fourth of the guards are students earning work-study credit. Likewise, the Huntington Library, Art Collections

HERB SWANSON *For The Times*



KARL STEVENS

DOUBLE DUTY: *Karl Stevens, top, author of a graphic novel, "Guilty," left, sketches while on the late shift at two Harvard University museums.*

and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, the Seattle Art Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and the Whitney, Museum of Modern Art and Guggenheim in New York all share similar stories.

It can't be the money: According to the most recent data from the American Assn. of Art Museum Directors, museum guards in California averaged about $23,000 a year in 2002.

Chicago photographer Tom Harney, a guard at the Art Institute of Chicago since 1988, says he became a guard because, once your legs get used to the standing, the job is less mentally and physically taxing than other positions he has held to support his art habit.

Those include bartender, traveling camera salesman and night watchman at an industrial plant. At the plant, Harney was less successful than Stevens in combining artwork with his night job. "My last responsibility was to open up the gates and let all the employees in," Harney recalls. "I was burning the candle at both ends, doing a lot of matting and other work while I was there. One time I just fell asleep and nobody could get into the plant. So that was my last day on *that* job."

Now, "I'm in the galleries some of the time, and the rest of the time I am behind the scenes doing what they call 'contractor escorts' — people who come in to do physical work have to be escorted wherever they go — we have a lot of that now because we're putting in a new wing," Harney says. "I don't mind doing that because it's extra hours, you make a little more money, but I also love being in the galleries because that's where the art is.

"There are some galleries that I like more than others — I mean, you can only look at English porcelain for so long. I much prefer being up where the painting is."

South Pasadena native John Vince began his career as a graphic and advertising designer, working on album covers for Frank Zappa in the early 1960s. Now the 60-year-old has turned to painting — and a guard job at the Huntington.

"The computer came along and pretty much started doing everything I used to do: hand-lettering and preparing art for printing," Vince says. "Thank heaven for the security job here at the Huntington. I never get tired of actually coming here, because it's so beautiful, and I get to see new shows and paintings all the time. We say it's like another day in paradise when we come to work."

Not all artist-guards, however, find paradise in the galleries. Although Kieltyka enjoyed the camaraderie he found at the Seattle museum, it did not lead to the art world contacts he had hoped for.

"The uniform turns you into someone rather faceless, it turns you into a *persona non grata*," he says. "It does make a person feel like, 'Wow, I'm an artist, I have this education and I came here to be around this — why won't anyone talk to me?' "

Artist Fred Wilson had a similar experience when he worked at the Neuberger Museum of Art outside New York City during his art school days. It inspired one of his best-known works: "Guarded View."

The 1991 piece features four life-size, headless mannequins, all brown-skinned, wearing the uniforms of four top Manhattan museums and intended to draw attention not only to the facelessness of museum guards, but to serve as a commentary on issues of race and class in the museum world.

Background fixtures

SUE McGUIRE, a New York painter, was hired at the Guggenheim as part of the same program as Knipfel and later worked as a night guard at the Whitney. She too chafed at being an artist hidden behind a badge.

"It's a very strange job to have because you are in the art field, but yet you are sort of stigmatized by the uniform," she says. "Potentially where you want to have your art is in a museum, and to have people look at you in a negative sort of way is very disconcerting."

When she worked at the Whitney, McGuire said, artists were in the minority among the guards. She did, however, observe that non-artist guards often developed a strong interest in the work in the galleries. She was surprised to find that they particularly liked the often-outrageous contemporary works included in the Whitney Biennial exhibition.

"I think that was the one they really looked forward to — the pieces were more provocative and more current, they could relate to them more," McGuire says.

Another Guggenheim guard from McGuire's era felt the anonymity but enjoyed listening to the conversations of high-level art-world players. "I got to see things from the inside out," says artist Linda Hunsaker, who now lives in Santa Fe, N.M., and specializes in works on paper. "You get on an elevator and they just keep talking — it sort of demystified the New York art world for me."

The irony of being an artist in uniform was not lost on Redondo Beach multimedia artist Darick Chamberlin, a guard at the Seattle Art Museum from 1988 to 2001. Still, the opportunity to be a fly on the wall in an art institution was, to him, the positive side of anonymity.

Chamberlin enjoyed escorting curators and celebrity guests on their private tours. And he has fantasized about a museum exhibition that would hang paintings with their faces toward the wall, so visitors could see the fascinating historical data found on the backs — dates, signatures and other marginalia that Chamberlin saw after hours when paintings were stacked against walls, waiting to be hung.

"When the museum is closed, you are walking the floor and having a private experience with the art," Chamberlin muses. "You can have a long and ongoing relationship with individual objects, or pieces. You can have worked more hours next to an object than an individual.

"When I think back to working there, some of the 'people' I miss might be on a canvas. And that can be very strange."