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NEWS RELEASE

The University Gallery is pleased to exhibit HALFWAY TO PARADISE, a mixed media installation of wall works and sculpture by THOMAS LANIGAN SCHMIDT, on view from October 29 through December 14. The exhibition presents work from the past thirteen years and displays Schmidt's consistent child-like frankness and decorative spontaneity. The themes upon which Schmidt most often concentrates are religious experiences, sexual perceptions, and class differences. Using inexpensive and readily available materials such as aluminum foil, cellophane, marking pen, tinsel, and glitter, Schmidt creates opulent and fanciful artworks that make pointedly significant social and political statements.

Schmidt's art is rooted in the imagery and atmosphere that surrounded him as a child. He imbues his work with the values of his working-class background as well as with his love for the mysterious rituals and sacred symbols of his Roman Catholic faith. Christ the Judge (Image Not Made By Human Hands), a two-dimensional work from 1978-79, shows the art-historically correct representation of "Christ Pantocrater" ("Christ the Almighty One"), a familiar icon from 12th-century Byzantine art. Icons were believed to be images miraculously created without human intervention. These divine portraits were then duplicated by earthly means but the concept of the miracle was retained by the supplicant. Schmidt's Christ the Judge continues this sacred tradition and comments on the multiple reproductions of beloved holy individuals or events that are tenderly displayed in religious households. The artist calls our attention to the insignificance of material or consumer value placed upon religious articles and reminds us that it is the tremendous power of belief that gives meaning to the image and which is ultimately important. An example of one of Schmidt's shrine-like sculptures is The Big Top at 4 A.M. (Fantasy, Anxiety, and Animal Desire: Someone said they had Ants in Their Pants Because they Made Love in the Crab Grass), 1982, which at first resembles a manger bedecked with tinsel garlands and a picture of Alfred E. Neuman (Mad Magazine) greet us at the entrance to the manger. Within the dwelling are collage elements ranging from a photograph of Zsa Zsa Gabor to an unidentified man offering, or having just offered, himself for paid sexual services. Tubes of A-200, an ointment to treat sexually transmitted parasites, lie about the interior. The Big Top at 4 A.M. expresses the artist's sentiment that "sex and love (are) simultaneously exalted and debased in society." The work clearly demonstrates Schmidt's lavish skill in splicing together images from different contexts to create a piece which reflects life's sometimes poignantly contradictory experiences.

Born in 1948, Thomas Lanigan Schmidt presently lives and works in New York City. A long list of museums and galleries make up the artist's exhibition history. Among them are the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City; the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. Over the course of the five-day installation of the artist's work at the University Gallery, Schmidt will be assisted by several undergraduate students of the University's Art Department. The artist feels that this kind of collaboration is an important part of the artmaking process and of his responsibilities as an artist.

This exhibition is presented in conjunction with the Holly Solomon Gallery, New York City, and the Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis. It is supported by funds from the Alumni Association and Arts Council of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

The University Gallery, located in the Fine Arts Center, is open to the public Tuesday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday, 2 to 5 p.m.