

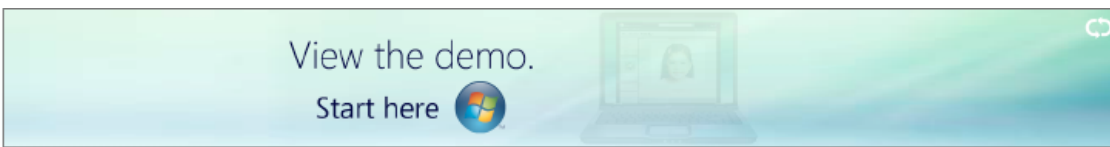
Tuesday, November 27, 2007

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Charney: ‘Sexy’ art crime not just in movies

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Noah Charney thinks a lot about stealing expensive art.

Dressed in a sports coat and shiny leather shoes, Charney, a leading researcher of art **crime** and the author of the novel “Art Thief,” spoke to a room of about 25 at a Calhoun College Master’s Tea on Monday, later offering signed copies of his new novel for sale.

Charney said he hopes to dispel the misconception that Picassos are only stolen in movies. In Italy alone, for example, 20,000-30,000 art thefts are reported each year, he said.

After money laundering and the trafficking of weapons and drugs, art theft is the fourth most-common criminal activity worldwide. They result in more than \$6 billion per year in stolen goods, assets which may fund organized crime or even terrorism, according to the Association for **Research** into Crimes against Art, an **international** consortium on art crime that Charney founded.

“Eighty percent of ‘sexy art crimes’ are funding other illicit activities,” Charney said.

The 27-year-old, who was born in New Haven, earned graduate degrees in art history from the Courtauld Institute in London and Cambridge University.

He said he has used his art history degrees in a nontraditional way — to become a pioneer in the study of art crime.

“My work is largely theoretical,” he said. “I see artwork as a visual riddle, with the act of intellectual engagement as part of the viewer’s sense of enjoyment. ... That’s a very bombastic way of saying you learn s--- by looking at art.”

His mother, Diane Charney, a professor of French literature at Yale, said her son’s work may help bring an easily marketable but underrepresented subject to a wide audience.

“I’m a big fan of art theft adventure films like ‘The Thomas Crown Affair,’” she wrote in an e-mail. “But until I learned from Noah about the magnitude and severity of art crimes and their link to international terrorism, organized crime and the drug trade, I never really imagined the importance of what Noah was undertaking.”

By conducting research into the mentality of art criminals using the principles of psychology, criminology and deductive logic, he said he is planning to construct a database on past thefts. In order to maintain their reputations and attract art donors, some museums are hesitant to contact police when their security systems have been breached, he said, a trend which has caused a deficit of evidence on art thefts. For this reason, he hopes to assemble data independently in order to “extrapolate trends” into what motivates art crime.

He said an international organization is needed to track missing artwork, since art stolen from one nation often surfaces in another.

Charney said he has collaborated with investigators from the FBI, Scotland Yard, the Spanish Policia and the Italian Carabinieri to understand and possibly help improve their responses to art crime, an area often overlooked by the authorities, especially in the United States. While the Carabinieri employs 300 full-time agents specializing in art crime, the FBI has only eight.

Some students at the talk said Charney’s comments highlighted the pertinence of the subject.

“[Charney] is leading the way on efforts that should have been running long ago,” Pete Martin

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Andrew Liotta/Contributing Photographer

“Art Thief” author Noah Charney speaks to students in Calhoun College yesterday. Theft of artwork is the fourth most-common criminal activity worldwide.

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WEDNESDAY

’10 said. “I’m surprised the public fascination with crime hasn’t settled on art crime yet.”

Martin is a staff columnist for the News.

Stolen art can be used as collateral for illicit goods or bribes for political favors, or can be held for ransom, Charney explained. He said police once raided a deal in which a painting was being traded for weapons.

With the solution rate of art crimes at a comparatively low 10 percent, Charney said he hopes his research will help investigative organizations and better train the personnel attending to museum security systems.

“The poor recovery rate is not helped by the lack of complicity between museums and police,” he said. “An alarm is only as good as the responsiveness of the guards meant to attend to it. We don’t need to throw money at high-technology security.”

The author discussed his novel as an attempt to bridge non-fiction with high-suspense entertainment, explaining that many of his novel’s twists and turns can be figured out by “looking deeper” into the dialogue.

Several students said Charney’s talk piqued their interest in reading his book.

“It is hard to reach the general public with an esoteric, rather dry, nonfictional literary account, which is why I liked his idea of converting facts about art crime into a readable novel,” Elizabeth Ralph ’10 said. “It would be great if he could bridge the gap between art history textbooks and entertaining but inaccurate beach-trash like ‘The DaVinci Code.’”

Despite Dan Brown’s international success for writing “The DaVinci Code,” Charney called it “an annoying book” because of what he called its arrogant tone and many inaccuracies.

Charney said he hopes his novel portrays the art world more accurately, since he has spent years studying the field and has interned at auction houses.

In addition to the release of his new novel, Charney has a number of projects slated for release in the coming year, including a documentary [television](#) series and an art-crime drama.

Charney will give a reading and book-signing at Atticus Bookstore and Café on Thursday.

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