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Laura Berman:

Clever ads transform DIA into getaway



Let's start with a simple question: "What pleases you about your home?"

This is the question that somehow wound up as an award-winning advertising campaign for the Detroit Institute of Arts.

You may have noticed the quirky commercials for the DIA, because they're striking and simple.

They've been running since last fall and somehow cutting through commercial clutter with few words, animated line-drawings and a jazzy cello soundtrack.

In two 30-second spots, museum patrons wander around the museum. In one spot, the patron reaches out and -- voila -- goes from black-and-white to color. In the other, a male art-lover learns to fly to the tagline: "The New DIA. Let Yourself Go." Even John Pappas, an art director for the Ann Arbor ad agency that created the ads, credits Rita Denny, Ph.D., with getting to some basic truths about Art and Us.

"We already knew a lot about how people feel about museums," says Annmarie Erickson, who heads marketing at the DIA. The DIA wanted to better understand the primal appeal of art as a way to convince Metro Detroiters to visit the museum again and again.

Enter Rita Denny, Chicago anthropologist, one of a new breed of anthropologists who investigate our own culture with the kind of zealous curiosity that Margaret Mead once applied to Samoans.

Denny interviewed 19 area residents in their homes, asking questions about specific art objects in their homes and how they gave the residents pleasure. The interviews lasted three to four hours each.

She found that connecting with art was "getting away," a kind of mini-vacation. "Let yourself go," popped into the brain of John Pappas at Perich & Partners. And since the opening, the DIA has been drawing more than 10,000 visitors weekly, Perich & Partners picked up a few awards, and many of us are noticing those clever commercials. "We're thrilled," says Erickson.
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