

Live-Work Options

Generous benefactors, new museum facilities and a variety of exhibition and residency programs are helping to turn this heartland city into a culture hub.

BY STEPHEN MAINE

The depth of private philanthropy in Kansas City is remarkable, and that puts a huge stamp on much of what meets the eye of the art-viewing public in this former cattle town and sometime incubator of jazz. Yet even while one senses that the biggest benefactors sincerely want their town to be an artistic showcase, at the heart of the matter is a dialogue about whether art should challenge or confirm received cultural values, whether it is self-justifying or is validated by its economic role.

The face of downtown Kansas City, the center of a metropolitan area of nearly two million, has been transformed in the last decade with major new construction—arena, convention center and more—as well as the redevelopment of the city's substantial late 19th- and early 20th-century industrial building stock. Last year, two significant additions to the cultural landscape of the Midwest opened a few months and a few miles apart: the Bloch Building at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, situated in a verdant area four miles south of the city center, and the Nerman Museum at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kans. Many of the local artists, curators and arts administrators I spoke with are waiting to see if the energy behind these celebrated projects translates into a bigger audience for adventurous contemporary art.

With these additions, Kansas City is a great place to see art, and for many decades it has been a good place for young artists to study. The Kansas City Art Institute has a special spot in the heart (and balance sheet) of this metropolis, having offered an undergraduate curriculum and steady teaching jobs for area artists since 1885. Enrollment has been climbing for some years and is now over 600; the school is weighing the possibility of instituting a graduate program. Many in Kansas City's art world believe that such a program would help make the city a destination for artists, not just a way station, since it would add artists to the scene, and more teaching jobs.

The Nelson-Atkins

The original neoclassical building of the Nelson-Atkins dates from 1933. Its symmetrical floor plan, chronologically and geographically themed galleries, and grand entrance—the column-studded Kirkwood Hall—are lovely in a familiar way. The collection includes American and European paintings; significant holdings in African, Indian and Native American art; and—the legacy of erstwhile curator Laurence Sickman—one of the most important collections of traditional Chinese art in the U.S. The

sweeping, 22-acre Kansas City Sculpture Park is sited to the building's south.

Owing largely to a 10-year collecting initiative funded by the William T. Kemper Foundation since 1999, the Nelson's holdings of postwar American art, especially painting, have increased dramatically. The foundation has provided \$1 million per year; acquisitions are steered by the museum's modern and contemporary curator, Jan Schall, and Robert Storr, dean of Yale University's School of Art, serves as an adviser. The newly acquired works were featured over the summer in "Sparks! The William T. Kemper Collecting Initiative."

In 1997, a capital campaign was launched with an architectural addition as the goal. The selection committee was chaired by Donald Hall, son of the founder of Hallmark Cards, head of the Hallmark Family Foundation and an avid collector of painting and photography, while principal benefactor Henry Bloch led the building committee. The selectors chose a radical proposal submitted by New York-based Steven Holl Architects. Groundbreaking was in April 2001, with the ribbon-cutting for the \$200-million project in June 2007.

The Bloch Building is breathtaking. Unlike many new high-profile museums, it is determinedly serene in a way that defers to the artworks. The visitor's under-





View of the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art. Photos this spread Timothy Hursley.



standing of the complex, organic 165,000-square-foot space unfolds gradually, arising out of a kinesthetic experience of its stepped expanse. Holl partner-in-charge Chris McVoy likens the architecture to a Chinese scroll painting, “another art form that is experienced over time.” Taking cues from the sculpture park’s rolling topography, the building conceals much of its bulk under a “green roof” of topsoil and turf. As in numerous Holl projects, both residential and institutional, light is crucial. Five “lenses”—irregularly shaped, blocky volumes of white glass—protrude at intervals along the structure’s 840-foot length, admitting light from above. The innovative illumination system, based on a program of “fluttering T’s,” or splayed overhead light baffles, captures and diffuses incoming natural light from both north and south.

In contrast to the original building, to which it links via stairs, the Bloch galleries flow into one another, allowing visitors to determine their own paths. Seven entries, unencumbered by turnstiles in this free-admission institution, provide easy connection with the framing landscape. The intimacy of the building’s interior has a counterpoint in an exterior spectacle: 30 minutes before dusk, the lenses are illuminated. Light

Far left, nighttime view of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art with the Bloch Building on left.

Left, aerial view of the Nelson-Atkins Museum, showing Walter de Maria’s reflecting pool One Sun/34 Moons, 2002; Oldenburg and van Bruggen’s Shuttlecocks, 1994; and (left) the Bloch Building’s five structures.

washes upward within their double curtain walls, and the five radiant blocks seem to cascade down the gently manicured slope.

Marc F. Wilson, the Nelson’s director since 1982, says that as successful as the addition is, a bonus has been “how it has given new life to the old building.” Prior to the Bloch Building’s unveiling, the European collection was reconfigured, integrating fine and decorative arts; reinstatement will eventually extend to the entire collection. Annual visitorship climbed 75 percent in the year following the opening of the Bloch Building.

The Nelson’s modern and contemporary holdings are housed in the Bloch Building. Schall has paired disparate gems like *Mars* (1977), a brooding, brown Milton Resnick canvas flecked with blue and red, with Donald Judd’s towering *Large Stack* (1968), made of stainless steel and amber Plexiglas. The Contemporary Directions gallery houses a rotating selection of work since 1970, while the Project Space is devoted to temporary exhibitions, such as “Tapping Currents: Contemporary African Art and the Diaspora” (Nov. 17, 2007-Apr. 13, 2008), which gathered works by, among others, Julie Mehretu, Odili Donald Odita and El Anatsui.

Observers have debated the utility of the enormous lobby, as well as that of the sleek corridors that bypass the first few exhibition spaces and lead visitors to the Bloch Building’s midsection. Neither lobby nor corridors house any art—though they constitute

At the heart of recent changes in the city is a dialogue about whether art should challenge or confirm received cultural values, and whether it is self-justifying or validated by economics.



a sculptural experience in themselves—and critics see this as squandering exhibition opportunities when some of the galleries feel overhung. Walter de Maria's environmental sculpture, a reflecting pool titled *One Sun/34 Moons* that dominates the new entry plaza alongside the original building, has generated a more favorable consensus. Visitors arriving by car encounter it first from below, as portholes in the bottom of the pool allow flickering spots of filtered light into the underground parking garage, presaging the more elaborately channeled light in the Bloch Building.

The Nerman

The Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art opened in the fall of 2007 on the campus of Johnson County Community College, an approximately 40-year-old institution in one of the 10 most affluent counties in the nation. Designed by Kyu Sung Woo Architects of Cambridge, Mass., the building provides 12,000 square feet of exhibition space on two levels, as well as classrooms and an auditorium. Jerome and Margaret Nerman and their son, Lewis, were the main benefactors. An externally dramatic yet internally placid pair of cantilevered minimalist boxes, the museum is sheathed in white Kansas limestone. At the top of a walled incline, visitors enter an open lobby fronted by an impressive 16-by-140-foot clear-glass curtain wall. The galleries' airy feel is achieved via strategically placed windows and clerestories.

The Nerman's design gently ushers viewers through the museum in a path that unfolds through various designated spaces: ground-floor galleries house temporary exhibitions; upstairs are selections from the permanent collection, a new-media gallery, a project gallery reserved for area artists and a space for small-scale work such as drawing. The program calls for 16 to 20 shows annually.

The backbone of the museum's holdings is the Oppenheimer Collection, assembled for the college by Kansas City natives Tony and Marti Oppenheimer. The couple's donations to JCCC began in 1992 in collaboration with Bruce Hartman, curator and director of the school's Gallery of Art (and now director of the Nerman, which grew from that seed). At first, the gifts mainly augmented the school's existing collection of outdoor sculpture, but over the last three years the acquisitions have included more than 100 works

in all mediums by both established and emerging artists, many from the Kansas City area.

The campus boasts an additional collection of 500 artworks that are distributed among high-traffic locations, indoors and out. These include photography and works on paper, as well as ceramics by artists ranging from Eva Zeisel to Ron Nagle. Works by Korean-born sculptor Do-Ho Suh, African-American artist Kerry James Marshall and others provide JCCC's 36,000 students, only 15 percent of them minorities, with a variety of cultural perspectives. For the project gallery last summer, Hartman curated "Allusive Abstraction," featuring artists who live in Kansas City or went to school there, among them Eric Sall, Amy Myers, and KCAI professor and veteran painter James Brinsfield.

The Kemper

Not far from the Nelson-Atkins is the much smaller Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. Founded in 1994 by collectors R. Crosby and Bebe Kemper (he is the grandson of William T. Kemper of the Kemper Foundation that is aiding the Nelson's collecting), it is housed in a flashy but awkward 22,000-square-foot building designed by Gunnar Birkerts Architects of Wellesley, Mass. The Kemper program is not a favorite among the artists I spoke to.

Former curator Elizabeth Dunbar (now at Art-house in Austin) departed under fire following a controversial 2006 exhibition by L.A. artist Gajin Fujita that included work derived from *shunga*, the playfully erotic form of Japanese woodblock prints. The last show she curated for the Kemper was "Phantasmania," in the summer of '07. It featured surrealistically tinged work exploring inner, imaginary worlds. Christopher Cook, whom Dunbar hired as assistant curator, took her place. His debut show, "Putting the U back in Curator" (May 1, 2007-Jan. 20, 2008), was an exercise in esthetic democracy: visitors were invited to select work from the permanent collection and explain its significance to them.

Earlier this year, the museum hosted "Biographical Landscape: The Photography of Stephen Shore 1969-1979," a traveling exhibition organized by the Aperture Foundation, and over the summer "RubberMade: Sculpture by Chakaia Booker," featuring some two dozen of her works constructed primarily from altered automobile tires.

Programs and Foundations

David Hughes, Jr., launched the Charlotte Street Foundation (CSF) in 1997 to help support Kansas City artists through cash grants and group exhibitions at various locations. Formerly an executive with American Century Investments, which initially funded CSF and remains a major benefactor, he now concentrates full-time on the foundation. The CSF Awards have grown steadily in size; the four 2008 recipients (Jorge Garcia Almodovar, Mike Hill, Beniah Leuschke and Adolfo Martinez) received \$10,000 each. In total, CSF has granted \$392,500 to 65 artists. This year a similar program recognizing outstanding new work in the city's performing arts community was initiated.

The revitalization of downtown owes something to a CSF offshoot called Urban Culture Project, which started five years ago as a nomadic exhibition program. Paragraph Gallery, a 1,400-square-foot space near the heart of the downtown area known as the Loop (named after the surrounding network of interstate freeways), is its principal venue. Artist and curator Hesse McGraw set up Paragraph and curated some two dozen shows there; consistent with CSF's mission, his preference was for local talent. McGraw is now a curator at the Bemis Center in Omaha; a curatorial committee, chaired by CSF assistant director Kate



Larry Thomas: *Hide & Seek (detail)*, 2007, vinyl decals; part of the Avenue of the Arts program. Photo courtesy Kansas City Municipal Art Commission.



Opposite top, view of Davin Watne's *Life Is a Collision*, 2008, taxidermied deer, automobiles and mixed mediums; at Review Exhibition Space. Photo EG Schempf.

Left, exhibition view of "The Ambivalent Nature of Things Around Us," showing works by Miles Neidinger (foreground) and Justin Farkas (background), both 2008; at Charlotte Street Foundation's la Esquina.

Bottom left, view of Jody Boyer and Russ Nordman's *Cinema City*, 2008, an evolving installation with model train, live-feed camera and video projections; at Charlotte Street Foundation's Paragraph Gallery through Oct. 4.

Below, Keith Sonnier's *Double Monopole*, 2006, neon waterfall sculpture; at the Kansas City International Airport. Courtesy Kansas City Municipal Art Commission.



Hackman, reviews proposals for Paragraph as well as three ancillary exhibition spaces: la Esquina, the Project Space and Jenkins. An affiliated studio program provides work spaces nearby for 13 artists.

The paucity of serious collectors is on the minds of artists and arts administrators all around town. (Indeed, dealers agree on the exact number: there are 20.) Most say that a weak collector base is an obstacle to keeping Kansas City's best and most ambitious artists close to home. Accordingly, CSF has launched a Collecting Initiative in association with the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects to encourage inclusion of art in construction budgets.

Review, Inc., a nonprofit founded 10 years ago, publishes *Review* magazine, a glossy monthly that contains local listings as well as features and reviews of both local and out-of-town exhibitions. The organization also oversees the Review Studios, housed in a rambling former warehouse building on the east side of the Crossroads district, a rapidly gentrifying but still slightly scruffy area just south of the Loop. The studio program was established in 2004 by artist Colby Smith and developer Brad Nicholson. Current residents include Kansas City "lifer" James Woodfill, Warren Rosser, the chair of the painting department at KCAI, as well as performance artist David Ford.

In exchange for contributing two major works annually, resident artists keep their space rent-

free. One work is sold individually to a patron; the other goes to a program collection that Review markets as a whole to corporate patrons. Proceeds go to Review. Additionally, each artist is required to mount an exhibition in Review's 6,000-square-foot gallery sometime during the residency. Executive director Dodie Jacobi says that its size often pushes artists to work at a larger-than-accustomed scale, citing Archie Scott Gobber's 2006 exhibition as an example. Gobber showed a 25-foot-long, accordion-fold billboard/sculpture that proclaims, "I AM THE SHIT." In March 2008, for "Life is a Collision," a show addressing the clash between the natural and man-made worlds, Davin Watne simulated the aftermath of an auto wreck with three cars and two taxidermied deer.

Public Art

The Kansas City Municipal Art Commission runs the city's Percent for Art program, active since the early 1990s. While not the cultural force it was a decade ago, when it was the only player, the program, administered by Porter Arneill, has recently underwritten a few highly visible projects connected to a spate of new building. Proposals are selected from open-call submissions by a committee including local art professionals, artists, community representatives and tenants of the site.

Keith Sonnier's *Double Monopole* (2006), a looming, billboardlike structure of jazzily colored neon near the Kansas City International Airport, welcomes arriving travelers. It does double duty as an aerator for reclaimed tarmac runoff, anticipating Olafur Eliasson's *New York City Waterfalls* with a cascading, wind-tossed downpour. Brooklyn-based multidisciplinary artist Chris Doyle embraces the entertainment value of public art in his popular 2007 project, *The Moons*. The agency's first video-based project, it greets visitors to the enormous Sprint Center Arena, in the Loop. Monitors mounted on poles that extend upward from manicured landscapes of trees, grass and shallow pools—"moons" hovering over little mounds that signify "earth"—show locals drifting through the air. The footage was gleaned from a marathon taping of Kansas City residents bouncing on a trampoline. The hulking arena's resemblance to a futuristic spacecraft makes the Doyle piece click.

Every summer since 2000, the Avenue of the Arts program has transformed several blocks of Central Street into an outdoor gallery featuring sculpture and temporary installations by six Kansas City artists. In partnership with the Municipal Art Commission, the public/private Avenue of the Arts Foundation has sponsored numerous provocative yet accessible projects. In the summer of '07, artist and JCCC instructor Larry Thomas addressed urban

Chris Doyle's *The Moons* features circular displays of videos showing locals drifting through the air—footage gleaned from a marathon taping of Kansas City residents bouncing on a trampoline.



Clockwise from top:
Ken Ferguson: Udder Jar with Mermaids, 1996, black stoneware with chrome slip, 24½ by 12 by 12 inches. Courtesy Dolphin Gallery.

Yigal Ozeri: Untitled, 2008, oil on canvas, 54 by 36 inches; at Byron C. Cohen Gallery through Nov. 1.

Chris Doyle's *The Moons*, 2007, three LED video screens; at the Sprint Center Arena. Photo Charlie Samuels, courtesy Kansas City Municipal Art Commission.

paranoia and issues of public versus private activity in *Hide & Seek*, adhering life-size vinyl decals of friends and colleagues to facades and other surfaces along Central Street. A few blocks away, an enormous, distinctly phallic banana by A. Bitterman and Deborah Pettid protruded from the side of the Folly Theatre, a stately brick building and former burlesque house. It was titled *Staying the Course*.

A more recent initiative is Art in the Loop, established in 2005 by the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation, courtesy of an anonymous, half-million-dollar donation. The program commissions permanent public art projects by graduates or faculty of KCAI.

Galleries

Ask a Kansas City artist where in town he or she wants to show, and the answer will likely be “at the Dolphin.” Owned and directed by John O’Brien, Dolphin Gallery has led the concentration of commercial galleries in the Crossroads district. An alumnus of KCAI, O’Brien set up shop 16 years ago; he and artist/dealer Jim Leedy, with separate enterprises, were pioneers in the area. Among the artists who have been represented by the gallery are several associated with KCAI, including ceramist Ken Ferguson (1938-2004), photographer Richard Loftis and painter (and 2006 Guggenheim fellow) Wilber Neiwald.

Having occupied its current space for over a decade, the Dolphin is relocating to West Bottoms, a low-lying industrial and warehouse district at the confluence of the Missouri and Kansas rivers. Once occupied by

stockyards, the Bottoms is prone to flooding but is dotted nevertheless with artists’ studios and other evidence of cultural production. O’Brien is retrofitting a former equipment showroom to include 4,000 square feet of exhibition space. (The Kemper Museum bought the erstwhile Dolphin building in February to serve as an outpost called Kemper at the Crossroads, where it plans to mount shows in 2,400 feet of dedicated exhibition space, with the aim of attracting a younger crowd.)

O’Brien credits Jim Leedy with being a guiding light and elder statesman for Kansas City artists. Leedy-Voulkos Art Center (a commercial gallery) seems to be open to art in a variety of forms, but the uneven quality suggests a wasted opportunity for this comfortably rambling space. Among the other, more aggressively commercial Crossroads galleries are those owned, operated and named after Byron C. Cohen and Sherry Leedy. With a bias toward narrative, Cohen represents smart, accessible artists with national reputations, such as photographer Chris Verene and sculptor James Croak. Sherry Leedy is Jim Leedy’s ex-wife and was director of Leedy-Voulkos from its inception in 1985 until 1998. She works with the Peter Voulkos estate, but her gallery’s strength is pristine, slightly surreal ceramics exemplified by the work of James Marshall, Chris Gustin and Ruth Borgenicht. A coordinated monthly evening of openings, music and attendant revelry dubbed “First Fridays” draws crowds.

But in Kansas City, commercial venues do not show the most challenging or innovative work. Belger Arts Center (BAC) is a nonprofit founded in 2000 by third-

generation shipping magnate Dick Belger and his late wife, Myra Morgan, in the cavernous Belger Cartage Service building on the southern fringe of the Crossroads district. For 30 years prior, Morgan had operated the Morgan Gallery, bringing cutting-edge art to Kansas City. She gave performance artist Chris Burden an early show, in November of 1971; called “You’ll Never See My Face in Kansas City,” it consisted of the artist sitting in the gallery for three days wearing a ski mask.

Visiting the BAC is a bit strange, as visitors enter through the loading dock of the first-floor trucking company, where some art is on view. But the art is top-drawer. With an emphasis on editioned works, the BAC shows a mix of regional and nationally recognized artists. About half of its exhibitions are from the Belger Family Foundation’s collection.

“Looking West,” mounted in the fall of ’07, examined the myth of the cowboy as it compares to everyday life in modern cattle country. Curated for BAC by Evelyn Craft of the Arts Center in St. Petersburg, Fla., the show included works by such omnivorous recyclers of cultural imagery as Terry Allen and William T. Wiley, as well as ostensibly “Western” artists like William Schenck and Luis Jiménez. More unexpectedly, the show featured several of Kansas-based Larry Schwarm’s eerie, large-scale photographs of blazing prairies. An exhibition of Terry Winters prints from the Belger collection was a highlight of BAC’s spring 2008 season.

Grand Arts was founded in 1995 in a former auto-repair shop on gritty Grand Boulevard by Hallmark heiress Margaret Hall Silva, who serves as executive



Clockwise from top: View of Sun Smith-Foret's "Silver Screen Quills" exhibition; at the Belger Arts Center through Oct. 3. Photo Gary Rohman Photography, Kansas City.

Larry Schwarm: CRP fire north of Haviland, Kansas, 2008, C-print, 48 inches square. Courtesy Belger Family Foundation and Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art.

Laurel Nakadate: Untitled Film Still (Men in the Forest), digital C-print from Stay the Same Never Change, 2007, 19 by 28½ inches. Courtesy Grand Arts.

director while single-handedly funding the outpost's operations. Not unlike BAC, Grand Arts functions as a hybrid of gallery and museum, presenting new art in a noncommercial context. Artistic director Stacy Switzer has steered its proposal-driven programming since the selection committee was disbanded in 2006.

Most shows are solos and have a conceptual and/or performative bent. Artists are generally from outside the area, and bring in ideas that are percolating in other parts of the country. In 2004, Chicago-schooled New Yorker Rosemarie Fiore caused a stir with *Good-Time Mix Machine*, creating enormous paintings with a Scrambler, that gyrating, many-armed amusement-park staple. Several months later, New York sculptor and installation artist Aidas Bareikis plumbed the other end of the emotional spectrum with his abject and trash-encrusted *Guard of Sorry Spirit*, a group-
ing of tattered, ghostly figures.

During installation, artists are housed in a stylish apartment on the facility's second floor. Last February saw *Stay the Same Never Change*, a feature-length movie starring local nonactors, shot last summer in Kansas City by the young Los Angeles video artist Laurel Nakadate while she made use of the apartment.

A number of adventurous venues include contemporary art as a major component of their programs. H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute occupies a spacious if otherwise unremarkable building just off the KCAI campus. Its four galleries, totaling 10,000 square feet, opened in the fall of 1999. Henry Bloch, through the tax firm he started with his late brother,

Richard, was the major initial donor, though now the facility is funded through the school; Raechell Smith oversees the installation of about five shows annually, including student and faculty exhibitions.

In choosing work for "Past, Present, Future Perfect: Selections From the Ovitz Family Collection," mounted last October, Smith did not go the easy route of cherry-picking stars, but assembled a show with real personality, combining abstract constructivist rigor and figuration with a slightly sinister edge. Standouts included the darkly dreamy allegories of Romanian painter Victor Man, and the rumpled-looking sculptural formalism of L.A.'s Macrae Semans. More recently, the "Kansas City Flatfile Show" included two-dimensional work in all mediums by 160 or so local artists of varied prominence. Wall-mounted subgroupings were assembled by guest curators.

At the Greenlease Gallery on the campus of Rockhurst University, a Jesuit school south of Kansas City, director Anne Pearce has curated several shows every year since 2004, while also making space for one guest curator annually. Her recent "Conceptual Play: Stan Fernald and Jack Rees" included work informed by the artists' professional involvement in, respectively, medical illustration and architecture.

Looking Ahead

A supportive community of artists, respected museums, low rents and an innovative philanthropic apparatus are the big pluses of the Kansas City scene. The requisite critical press is led by the perceptive and

seasoned critic (and *A.i.A.* contributor) Alice Thorson at the *Kansas City Star*. Pithy capsule reviews by Dana Self in *The Pitch*, a print monthly with a frequently updated website (www.pitch.com), provide crucial running commentary that helps spark the city's cultural conversation.

Kansas City artists view the new institutional venues with a mix of optimism and skepticism. The Nerman has generated a lot of excitement, and the enthusiasm of its director, Hartman, seems to rub off on everyone who meets him. In contrast, Grand Arts' Switzer believes that the Nelson "thinks of itself as bringing great art to Kansas City, but they're not so supportive of locals. We are waiting to see if and how the curatorial program might change as a result of its expansion."

In any case, Kansas City's standing in the art world continues to rise. Elijah Gowin, a 2006 CSF Award winner and director of photographic studies at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, is among this year's Guggenheim fellows. Last May, the American Institute of Architects gave the Bloch Building a prestigious Honor Award. Going by the moniker "Satellite," a curatorial project by a group of young Kansas City artists turned heads (and placed work) at last December's Bridge art fair in Miami. As such events direct the art world's attention to Kansas City, it might well assume a place alongside Chicago, St. Louis and Minneapolis as a center for art in the country's heartland. □

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