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Art For a Change



Key area art events and exhibits share the spotlight in 2009 A-list

by Michael J. Krainak

January is almost gone, but it's not too late to make at least one New Year's resolution that matters. How about "Art! For a change!" Now, there is a mantra that might improve your quality of life.

Looking at 2009, you probably put your time, faith, money and effort into a lot of things; politics, perhaps, maybe the stock market, possibly a new social network. How did it all turn out? Are we any better off because of our gadgets, billion dollar bailouts or reality TV? Is living virtually and vicariously how we interpret "Nebraska ... The Good Life"?

For the past five years this critic has assessed what each creative class has offered its community by way of significant arts events and exhibits. This "A-list" evaluates how visual artists and their venues have improved our lives directly at times, intangibly, in others. Though the A-list concerns itself exclusively with contemporary art, often difficult for its public to appreciate, let alone evaluate, Mark Masuoka, executive director of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, said the issue is greater than that.

"For me, it's not a matter of whether contemporary art should be viewed or valued," Masuoka said, "but that artists be recognized for being at the core of any social, cultural and economic revolution."

"Without art, we have no humanity or any chance of regaining any sense of civility in our society," he said.

The key word in Masuoka's tough assessment of art's relationship to the good life is "regaining" as it recognizes that our social contract is torn, that our environment is shaped by its divisiveness — red state vs. blue state, tea-baggers vs. progressives, insurance and banking CEOs vs. the uninsured and the foreclosed. What was that about "a house divided"?

Creating an environment for social change was the national buzzword in the 2008 presidential campaign.

Masuoka believes "artists are the change agents for social, cultural and



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economic revival.”

No one is suggesting that artists replace political, economic and military leaders in the quest for a new social and economic paradigm; but art, especially contemporary art, can be a catalyst in creative solutions to the same problems that will continue to challenge every society and generation. Bemis curator Hesse McGraw believes that as long as artists are part of the discussion, their impact on a community's economic and cultural growth extends beyond an exhibit or a public arts project.

“Artists are the early adopters of cities,” McGraw said. “They take ownership of unwanted spaces, create excitement and transform them into highly desirable places. Artists were responsible for the organic development of the Old Market. Omaha should leverage its citizens' investments in creativity and artists to bring about unforeseen models and ecstatic possibilities for this city.”

Artists continued to be “transformers of their environment” in 2009, and key factors as well as events impacted them as well as the Omaha region. Chief among them was, and is, the economy. Not a single arts center, institution or venue went unaffected, but some responded and continue to rebound better than others as contributors to the area's contemporary arts scene.

Especially hard hit were Omaha's two largest arts institutions, Bemis Center and the Joslyn Art Museum. But there is positive news as well. After a disappointing annual auction in 2008, its largest fundraising effort, Bemis experienced some staff downsizing, a diminished use of its Underground and fewer exhibits in its first-floor galleries.

Yet, Bemis never faltered in its commitment to its internationally famous artist-in-residence program; and 2009 saw increased development in its online presence, e-news and podcasts as well as its onsite lectures and artist talks that reach out to the community. Remarkably, Bemis extended its campus with a multi-functional art venue in its Okada sculpture facility east of its main building, initially titled *A Pre-Conscious Space*, an architectural installation by Oregon-based artist Sean Ward.

While the Joslyn searched for a new director after the departure of Brooks Joyner, it continued to lose key personnel. It now has only one official curator in charge of exhibitions and collections. Speaking of which, an economic boon was the gift of 50 contemporary artworks from the remarkable personal collection of Dorothy and Herbert Vogel. Joslyn capitalized on this with its only significant contemporary 2009 art show, *Fifty Works for Fifty States*.

Joslyn extended its campus with its long-awaited Peter Kiewit Foundation Sculpture Garden as it continued community outreach with impressive tours, classes, lectures, arts groups and events, such as its popular Jazz on the Green program. Its current exhibition, *The Human Condition*, bodes well for a possible renewed interest in contemporary art in 2010.

Bemis' single biggest event remains its annual auction, which in 2009 saw one of the most successful in its 11-year history. Aside from its fundraising function, the auction creates the biggest art vibe in the community, allowing area patrons to experience local favorites alongside nationally and internationally known artists. It is also the region's largest exhibition of contemporary art each year. It was given greater curatorial significance last year by McGraw, that is, if you revisited this creative class over the show's nine-week duration.

Bemis hosted the second most significant contemporary art event, the outrageous *The Omaha Diner*, a dining and viewing experience full of

"shock and offal." Performance artist, chef and painter Paul Renner, an international bon vivant and provocateur, created two dinners in a Bemis gallery that revelers won't soon forget. Hooking up with the Boiler Room's chef extraordinaire, Paul Kulik, Renner entertained with his menu of organ meats, plus the lining of a cow's liver, served on a lovely tablecloth of caul fat.

Replete with a new series of Renner's expressionist paintings, the evening's program will linger longer than even the odor of the tablecloth left to decay in the gallery. It's the sort of happening Bemis does best, a reminder that contemporary art is not limited to public taste or political correctness, which are fickle at best and censorial at their worst. Contemporary art, no matter how outré it may be, is a catalyst for change in a free society willing to think and act outside the status quo.

Another major Omaha institution devoted to creative solutions is KANEKO cultural center, occupying nearly a city block east of Bemis. Founded by artists Jun and Ree Kaneko, it fosters discourse and research in the areas of the arts, sciences and philosophy. To that end, KANEKO partnered with UNO to create a library at the corner of its 12th and Jones setting. In its very urbane, industrial setting of metal, concrete and glass, complete with every form of technology and Internet connection to the world, the Kaneko-UNO Library will serve UNO students and faculty first, and later "become available for people with serious interests in innovation and creative activity."

It is always a plus when Omaha is proactive in community building, especially when it takes steps to make sure the next generation is part of the equation and thus help to prevent further brain drain. This is especially true of a community's ability to draw and sustain new creative artists and talent. The news in this area is good and bad. Regrettably, no major university in the metropolitan area offers a Master of Fine Arts program, a huge opportunity and incentive for any city's young artists to finish their formal education and perhaps become part of the area's next creative class.

An MFA program almost happened when the newly organized Omaha Creative Institute, a project of the Hot Shops Foundation, tentatively announced that a new educational facility north of its building at 13th and Nicolas would be anchored by Bellevue University and its graduate studies in studio arts. Regrettably, Bellevue backed out at the midnight hour. To its credit, OCI soldiers on with classes for the general public in the fine and applied arts.

On a brighter note, the newly formed Kent Bellows Foundation extended its progress in 2009 with improvements in its facility at 33rd and Leavenworth and its successful mentoring program. Even as area grade and high schools devalue art education in their curricula, KBF offers after-school and weekend studio classes mentored by many of the area's best contemporary artists. Proof of the program's success was seen in its third student/mentor show held in the Bemis Underground.

Perhaps 2009's biggest art event on behalf of encouraging and sustaining area artists was the groundbreaking of Iowa West Foundation's Harvester Art Space Lofts in Council Bluffs. The historic International Harvester Building across the river is being renovated into 36 studio/housing spaces and should open officially in the fall of 2010. Art Space's potential for helping local and emerging artists create and remain in their own market cannot be overestimated.

Speaking of the art market, the economy also influenced local galleries, although it seems that as one door closes, another opens. This was so in the Old Market area as the influential Pulp gallery closed after moving

from its original site in Benson. The good news here is that its owner, Brigitte McQueen, is the new manager of the Bemis Underground and will bring her considerable curatorial skill to play with the Underground's first 2010 show in February.

Worthy gallery exhibits depend on curators. Omaha was blessed in 2009 not only with McGraw and McQueen, but with Christina Narwicz at the renovated Jackson Artworks, Rob Gilmer at his RNG Gallery and the newly opened 616, Paula Wallace at Hot Shops and Joel "Mighty" Damon wherever he went. They were responsible for organizing many of 2009's best shows. Omaha is fortunate to have them.

Before we list the best shows of 2009, consider also what is outside the box in the form of public art. The single biggest example in Omaha was the completion of *Fertile Ground*, the 32,500 square foot mural created by Meg Saligman on the Energy Systems Building at 13th and Webster. The mural, depicting Omaha's past, present and future, back to front, was funded by the Peter Kiewit Foundation in collaboration with the Bemis Center.

Joslyn's Sculpture Garden opened to mixed reviews in 2009, and although it can't be seen from Dodge Street due to its long, dark retaining wall, it does contain some significant pieces including the marvelous *Omaha Riverscape* created by sculptor Jesus Moroles. Not as significant is the controversial Sioux Warrior, who appears to be perched atop a pony in this out-of-scale design. Regrettably, one of Joslyn's finest examples of contemporary sculpture, George Sugarman's *Yellow Ascending*, has been placed virtually out-of-sight to the northwest corner where it has been caged in the children's Discovery Garden.

Public art prospered in Council Bluffs with the unveiling of the next stage of the IWF's multi-million dollar project, the 50-foot aluminum *Molecule Man* created by sculptor Jonathan Borofsky.

The most public acknowledgement of area visual art and artists was the third annual Omaha Entertainment and Arts ceremony at the Holland Center. It honored 2008 winners such as the late Kent Bellows, Joseph Broghammer twice over and Steve Joy as Best Visual Artist. The 2009 OEAA program is this Sunday, Jan. 24, at the Mid-America Center in Council Bluffs. You can see the artist nominees' exhibit at Hot Shops through Jan. 30.

Many of these visual artists are featured in this year's A-list of best exhibits seen and reviewed by yours truly. My criteria are familiar: What was the artist or group trying to express and was it accomplished? Does the work demonstrate quality of craft and technique? And, as contemporary art, does it resist mainstream taste in pursuit of an original idea, expression and experience? The A-list is composed of 14 superior exhibits, seven group and seven solo, in three tiers or levels. The third tier contains four exhibits notable for the potential of the work or the example it sets for others:

*Mark Makers* at the Jackson Artworks clearly demonstrated that mastering line, tone and shape can be more than putting a pencil to paper.

*Unwashed*, curated by Damon at the Bancroft Gallery, was the year's best display of local emerging artists, a huge talent pool.

*Panoptic* at Creighton University's Lied Gallery was curated by the new education director of KBF, Weston Thomson. The quality of this mentors' group show proved the center's student arts program is in good hands.

Iggy Sumnik's exhibit of "jelly beans," "chunk stacks and Zulu pipes" at the JAW is the only solo show in this tier. Sumnik is one of the most innovative sculptors in this area.

The second tier, featuring art at the next highest level of creativity, complexity and professionalism is composed of two group and three solo exhibits:

Both group shows at this level were shown at the JAW which made superior use of its new space. The first was *Hand Maid*, which highlighted the ceramic art of five local women who gave clay a unique feminine touch. It was a memorable exhibit. So was the innovative *Field Guide*, composed of four mostly abstract and conceptual artists who explored spiritual and material landscapes.

Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but no one made it more accessible last year than painter Terry Rosenberg in his solo show at 616. It was fluid and abstract.

East Coast painter James Meyer brought his richly abstract and personal paintings to the RNG, creating a rare opportunity for Omaha to see significant contemporary art from outside the region.

But the most conceptual and interactive art continued to come from Bemis with two challenging shows, *spurse: MATR*, a personal favorite, and the more accessible installation *402 (Disconnect/Reconnect)*, a multi-media opportunity for Omaha to get in touch with artist Matt Dehaemers as well as with itself.

The first or top tier in the A-list represents exhibits of the highest order as to reputation, scope, risk and the ability to take viewers outside their comfort zone:

One has to begin with Lincoln's Sheldon Museum of Art's relative survey of Omaha's most significant artist, Jun Kaneko, whose large ceramic heads (*dangos*) and designs adorned the museum's lobby. In addition, the show, *Play's the Thing* also gave a rare look at the artist's paintings, works on paper and opera costume designs.

Although they lack Kaneko's international rep, local artists Claudia Alvarez and Wanda Ewing offered the two most significant solo shows in 2009 in terms of their growth and depth. Alvarez's *Corn Eaters* at RNG was a truly inspirational display of 50 watercolors, oils and installation of children at risk as metaphors for adult stress and vulnerability. Though Ewing continued her exploration of gender/racial issues and identity in her edgy prints in *Flower Power* at Pulp, her show ventured toward the more conceptual and abstract.

Interestingly, the two best group shows of 2009 exhibited experimental, contemporary photography. The first was on view at Sheldon, which hosted *Evolving Eden: Three Photographic Perspectives* as part of Lincoln's citywide Photo-Fest. *Eden*, in the evocative imagery of artists Arno Minkkinen, Edward Burtynsky and Hans Eijkelboom, never looked at once both exotic and familiar.

Yet arguably, for the second year in a row, the best overall contemporary art show came from the nomadic Moving Gallery, directed by Mark and Vera Mercer. Curated by installation/multi-media artist and professor Humberto Chavez, *land-escapes*, a highly complex and conceptual group show of Latino photo artists, lived up to historian Michael Fried's contention, "why photography matters as art as never before."

At a time when community building faces challenges as never before, at

the local level, Omaha's creative class of 2009 offered its own inspiration in the form of contemporary art ... for a change.

*21 Jan 2010*

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