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This art curator is hands-on

By John Pitcher | WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



JEFF BEIERMANN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Brigitte McQueen, left, works with artist Tana Quincy to prepare an exhibit of her work at the Bemis Underground. Preparing for three exhibits means plenty of hands-on work for everyone.

Brigitte McQueen scribbles a lengthy to-do list on poster paper, tapes it to her gallery wall and swigs cold coffee.

“This is going to be my life for the next few days,” says McQueen as she stares at her agenda. Her assistants, Joel Damon and Jackie Sterba, nod in silent agreement.

It's just after 10 a.m. on a Tuesday, and McQueen, the new manager and curator of the Bemis Underground, is preparing for another marathon work session. The gallery is about to open three new art exhibits. She must, of course, meet with the artists, hang their paintings and finish many other art-related tasks. Yet she also must devote considerable time to work that often seems, well, more janitorial than curatorial.

In addition to hanging the art, McQueen and her assistants will spend the next few days sweeping floors, cleaning bathrooms and painting walls. They'll paint and polish tables and countertops. And they'll move furniture and create exhibition signs.

The public perception that gallery directors lead glamorous lives — wearing fancy clothes, admiring fine art, enjoying wine and cheese, hobnobbing and exchanging air kisses with the rich and famous — is palpably false. More often than not, work behind the scenes at an art gallery is long, arduous and dirty.

As its name suggests, the Bemis Underground is in the basement of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts. McQueen took over the space in January with the mission of turning the old, musty, paint-chipped gallery into a pristine exhibition hall.

First thing on this day's agenda is to fetch a table from the fourth-floor attic.

McQueen wants to set up a small reading library in one of the gallery's back rooms. Books there will relate to the exhibits. The artists whose works are on display will choose the books, and visitors can sit at the table and read them.

As McQueen, Damon and Sterba head for an elevator, they pass Bemis director Mark Masuoka in the hallway. Masuoka asks for a quick update, and McQueen tells him her plans for a gallery library.

“Excellent,” Masuoka says. “That's exactly what the Underground needs to become: a proper exhibition space.”

The route to the attic turns out to be circuitous.

First, McQueen and her crew take a cramped elevator from the basement to the first floor. The bright red panels inside the elevator intensify claustrophobic feelings.

“This place reminds me of hell,” says Sterba, a friend of McQueen's who has volunteered for the day.

On the first floor, they cross a hall and enter an old-fashioned freight elevator.

The sprawling, 100,000-square-foot art center is in a century-old building that used to be the McCord-Brady wholesale grocery warehouse. The huge freight elevator is basically an open platform with wooden gates that riders open and close manually. Despite its age and size, the elevator is surprisingly fast.

Once on the fourth floor, Damon opens the gate and steps back in surprise. A figure emerges from the darkness.

It's Masuoka.

“What took you guys so long?” he asks.

After running into McQueen and company, Masuoka remembered that he needed supplies from the attic. So he scurried up the back stairs, moving so quickly that he seemingly bilocated.

“That guy's a squirrel,” Damon says.

Damon, the Bemis' Jack-of-all-trades technical assistant, meant that as a supreme compliment. Masuoka is a real hands-on executive who does all of his own dirty — and sometimes even dangerous — work.

For instance, he recently climbed to the top of a stepladder that was perched on a scaffold to paint the 25-foot-high wall in front of the Bemis Underground's atrium.

“Mark has an incredible sense of balance,” Damon says.

McQueen finds a scuffed-up table in the middle of the attic. The group loads it onto a dolly and heads for the freight elevator.

“Well, maybe this table won't look so obnoxious once we paint it,” McQueen says.

Back at the Bemis Underground, McQueen and her crew divvy up the work.

Sterba takes the table to the library and begins hammering nails into its warped top. She'll later sand and paint it.

Damon goes to the atrium and begins work on a sign that will hang outside the gallery door. McQueen turns her attention to the long countertop in the front of the gallery.

Wearing a paint-smearred floral smock and dust-covered blue jeans, McQueen uses sandpaper to smooth the top of the dirty, worn counter. Every few minutes, she sweeps the dust off the counter with her hand. Some of it lands on the floor, but much of it wafts onto her smock and jeans.

As she brushes herself off, Matt Lowe, the Bemis' technical manager, enters the gallery to check on track lighting for the exhibit.

“You guys have done an incredible amount of work around here,” Lowe says.

McQueen flashes a smile.

“I've had a lot of help,” she says. “At Pulp I had to do everything myself.”

McQueen opened Pulp in Benson in 2007 and moved it to the Old Market two years later. It was both a business that sold customized greeting cards and paper products and an art gallery that showcased works on paper.

A Detroit native, McQueen originally came to Omaha in 2002 by way of New York City. She had been working there as a Web editor for Teen People magazine. The job allowed her to work remotely, so she moved to Omaha to be near friends.

At that time, she didn't own a car and had trouble fitting in.

So in 2004 she moved to Seattle to attend culinary school. She wanted to open her own business but soon realized that starting a restaurant would be very expensive. She decided to open a gallery instead. She got a car, moved back to Omaha and opened Pulp.

Unlike many curators, McQueen doesn't have a fine arts background or degree. She doesn't paint, sculpt or take photographs. And she doesn't read thick textbooks on art history.

She does, however, have an editor's eye for fine details — after painting a gallery room, she'll spend hours walking around, looking for tiny smudges and imperfections.

Masuoka noticed that quality when McQueen volunteered to work on an Omaha Entertainment and Arts exhibit at the Bemis last year.

When he needed a new manager for the Bemis Underground, he offered McQueen the job.

“Hey, Brigitte, you have a decision to make,” says Damon, interrupting McQueen as she was about to paint the countertop.

Damon had finished painting the exhibit sign and was beginning to apply custom-made vinyl letters. The letters spelled out the gallery's name and listed the artists and exhibits. There was a problem with the letter “i” in Bemis.

“It doesn't have a dot,” Damon says. “What do we do?”

McQueen ponders the problem for a moment.

“Let's just leave it,” she says. “It doesn't look so bad.”

Just then, McQueen notices somebody wandering through her gallery, looking at a few recently-hung paintings.

“Hey, Becca, where did you come from?” McQueen says.

Rebecca Herskovitz is admiring her own art.

For the past few months, she had been working on “The Things I Cannot Say,” a major show for the Bemis Underground. The exhibit features drawings and paintings, including many sensuous, even erotic, nudes.

McQueen had just installed some track lighting. Now she wants to show it off to Herskovitz.

“Check this out,” McQueen says. “It's going to look like Christmas.”

McQueen dims the main lights and turns on the track lights. It produces a warm, amber glow.

“That's the most amazing thing I've ever seen,” Herskovitz says. “Those paintings are popping off the wall.”

Contact the writer:

444-1076, john.pitcher@owh.com

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