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Solid Ground



**Brigitte McQueen aims to make the Bemis Underground the top space for Omaha's up-and-coming young artists**

by Sarah Baker Hansen

Brigitte McQueen has spent her last six weeks underground.

She's applied coat after coat of white paint to basement walls that used to be dingy gray. She's scrubbed floors and knocked down cobwebs and built walls where open space once reigned.

She's literally crossing things off her list — every time a task is complete, she marks it off a giant sheet of paper that covers the length of a 10-foot table.

As the newly appointed manager and curator of the Bemis Underground, she's bringing life back into a space that has helped launch the careers of several now-prominent Omaha artists, becoming an important part of the city's art scene in the past five years.

And McQueen, who earned her curatorial stripes at her own gallery, is doing it her way.

She's changed the way the Bemis Underground looks and the way it operates. And, beginning with three solo shows this weekend, she's aiming to make the Underground the top gallery for up-and-coming Omaha artists, and the spot where the city's young art community will congregate.

"It's not enough to go to an opening, drink a glass of wine, see some friends, look at a few pictures and then leave," McQueen said. "There has to be an ongoing dialogue about art."

With that in mind, she's planning more than just art openings for the Bemis Underground. A monthly potluck dinner will include artists, friends, residents from the Bemis Center's acclaimed artist-in-residence program, and the public. She wants to make artist lectures a regular occurrence. She'll host workshops to help local artists learn about stylistic trends and to improve their technique.

Eventually, she hopes to improve the acoustics of the high-ceilinged lobby and make it a destination for concerts. She'd love to see events like the Bemis' Slide Jam become a regular feature. It's a popular rapid-fire art talk where an artist has a few minutes to describe his work and gets stopped by a banging gong when time runs out.



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"There's nowhere in Omaha that offers these things to the community," McQueen said. "I want to ask 'Why not?' And I want to make them happen here."

The Underground's makeover is bound to attract artists and patrons like a magnet. Simply put, the Underground is no longer a basement afterthought. Now, it's a bona fide art gallery.

With help from friends and volunteers, McQueen has turned the cavernous, 3,000-foot space into three concise areas that give the Underground a new sense of flow.

Thoughtful touches like a seating area in the lobby and a reading room in what used to be a small, awkward gallery welcome you. A new color scheme — teal, orange and black — and a long front desk out front give it legitimacy. Soon the Bemis Underground will unveil a new logo and website, all redesigned to look and feel more like the main Bemis Center's branding.

McQueen has eliminated the Bemis Underground's artist-as-curator training program and the application process that used to decide who would show. She's acting as sole curator, and during this initial season, she'll decide who will show. More collaborative shows may become part of the second season.

All these aesthetic and operational changes are part of McQueen's larger goal: to make the space as high-end as possible. She said there's no reason the Bemis Underground should be any different than the Bemis Center itself.

"It was really important to me that, if I was going to be involved with this space, it be brought up to the level of things upstairs," McQueen said. "I think it's important to make a statement about what happens down here. The space had to be given some level of respect."

McQueen has earned the respect of many local artists she strives to curate at the new Bemis Underground. In 2007, McQueen opened Pulp Gallery in Benson. The local art crowd followed and it soon became a hot spot for emerging artists to exhibit.

In 2009, she moved the gallery from Benson to the Old Market passageway. After the move, and the economic downturn, she said her small gallery had become all-consuming. She felt as though she never left. And, she said, the decision to close was partly a financial one.

McQueen said when Bemis Center Director Mark Masuoka offered her a job, the decision to accept was easy.

She has pretty much been living in the new Bemis Underground, but she said it's been worth it.

The gallery has a successful but problematic past.

The Underground launched in 2005 with former Bemis Center Curator Jeremy Stern as director. He led it through two seasons of strong, notable shows that included many once-emerging artists who became community staples.

The list included Scott Blake's first solo show "Bring Your Barcodes," Jody Boyer and Russ Nordman's installation "Paramnesia," and Doug Hayko's performance piece "Far Away in the Orchard." The second season included more memorable work: the introduction of Jamie Burmeister's kinetic sculptures in "The Music Within my Head" and Rob Gilmer's vast installation "Dream House on Rye."

But there were some glitches.

Artists had to apply to show, and if selected, they acted as curator. This model was meant to do a few things, Stern said. It helped them learn to run a space and promote a show. It quickly became clear that it was nearly impossible for one artist to fill the 3,000 square feet alone.

"I always tried to inform people how big it was," Stern said from his home in Reno, Nevada, where he's pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree in sculpture. "But you say '3,000 square feet and low ceilings' and people picture their home basement. Even when you're in the space, it doesn't seem as big as it does when you're trying to fill it with work."

The artist-as-curator setup led to big group shows.

Stern said almost every artist had issues dealing with the unwieldy layout of the walls. Artists who decided on a big solo show — most notably, Scott Blake — needed work of all sizes and at least one installation piece idea. Stern said the artist doing a solo show had to commit weeks to the show and many didn't have time or the work to do it.

Stern left the Bemis Center in 2008. Rumors circulated as to who might take over the Bemis Underground. The final artist-curated show took place in November 2008, and by 2009 the gallery hosted only three openings, all work from the mentors and students at the Kent Bellows Studio and Center for Visual Arts.

Bemis Director Mark Masuoka said rethinking was in order. Until 2008, the Bemis' artist-in-residence program and the Bemis program director funded the Bemis Underground.

The Bemis decided to seek outside funding for the Underground, and received a grant from the Nebraska Arts Council in September 2008 to hire a manager. In November 2008, it obtained grant money from the Andy Warhol Foundation to fund the Underground's programs.

Masuoka and McQueen started talking about a possible collaboration in mid-2009. He said McQueen was the best person for the Underground job.

"She is a community connector," he said. "She brings people together in a common cause."

"The community needs to play an active role in making the Underground the cultural hub of our community," he said.

McQueen is aiming at that community support with three artists presenting their first solo shows. Two emerging local artists — Rebecca Herskovitz and Matthew Carlson — join a third, Tana Quincy, a native Nebraskan who just returned to the city.

Herskovitz, a special education teacher with Omaha Public Schools, creates provocative work that often explores the female form. She will show her current work, which uses text and re-interpreted erotic images to investigate questions like "What is connection?" and "What are the things we cannot say?"

University of Nebraska at Omaha graduate Carlson will make his fourth appearance in the Underground but it's his first solo exhibit. He'll show new paintings exploring complex themes of pop culture, mythology, and folklore.

Quincy returned from a five-year stint in New York, where she worked as a painter and illustrator and studied classical painting. In her work, she does extensive research of one subject to explore personal dialogue. For

this show, she'll create a piece using a series of plaster casts and human bones that explores an illness that has affected her joints and muscles. The healing process, which involved avoiding stress, has changed the way she looks at her life, and clarifies things she took for granted.

The rest of the first season includes emerging local names and more established local artists doing special projects for the Underground: Christine Stormberg, Brion Poloncic, Alex Myers, Caleb Coppock, Stephen Azevedo, Mark Gilbert, Victoria Hoyt, Adrienne Watson and a collaboration between Tim Guthrie and Doug Hayko. McQueen also has scheduled a \$100 per-piece art sale as a fundraiser for the Underground.

McQueen said she's sometimes felt intimidated playing the role of curator because her background, in journalism and publishing, lacks formal education. But she hopes her passion for the scene and the artists compensates for the lack of academic credentials.

She doesn't go into the artist's studio alone and choose work for the show. She never installs a show without the artist by her side to help hang the work and lend insight. She cares — that's why she's found herself in the basement of the Bemis Center, checking item after item off her giant list.

"I think of what I do as collaborative curating," she said. "I don't curate from my head. I curate from my heart."

*The Bemis Underground opens SODZO Work by Tana Quincy, The Things I Cannot Say: New Work by Rebecca Herskovitz, and Shapeshifters: New Work by Matthew Carlson, Friday, Feb. 19, with an opening reception 6-9 p.m. Visit [bemiscenter.org](http://bemiscenter.org) for more details.*

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