



Artistic Development

Rise of the Contemporary Class

by Casey Logan

For a night, it was the place to be. There was art, music, drinks and a host decked out in a red jumpsuit. There were pretty people aplenty, a few hundred throughout the night, milling about in a basement venue buried deep within the warehouse soul of the Old Market. There was even Jesus and Oprah and Arnold, all hanging from the walls in vainglorious form. It was, on this evening, the best party in town, an occurrence of something exciting and relatively groundbreaking in Omaha.

The exhibition, *Bring Your Bar Codes*, was organized by Scott Blake, one of six local artists chosen as guest curators for the inaugural season of the Bemis Underground. Supplied with \$750, Blake was responsible for designing the space, promoting the show, supplying the art and, perhaps most importantly, putting on the opening night reception.

His was to be the first show ever at the Underground, and Blake had exactly zero experience as a curator outside of the occasional show at What Gallery, a pseudonym for his midtown home.

Though the sponsoring Bemis Center took a hands-off approach to *Bar Codes*, its staffers knew its outcome would reflect on them as much as Blake. Any fears were quickly dissolved, however, as a steady influx of people kept the gallery populated throughout the night. Among attendees, a good percentage of them in their 20s and 30s, there was a sense that the space offered something new. Those who had anticipated its opening knew well what was in store for the months to come: five more experimental exhibitions, including a video installation, fashion show, performance art piece and group painting exhibit.

Meanwhile Mark Masuoka was looking further ahead. An artist at heart and a businessman by necessity, the Bemis director observed the *Bar Codes* reception from two distinct perspectives.

On the one hand, the space was full, with a high hipster quotient, lending the Underground an immediate legitimacy.

On the other hand, a Fader subscriber is not your typical Bemis Center benefactor. For its enthusiasm and style, the Underground crowd all together might have mustered the annual donation of a

modest Bemis patron.

Which is why Masuoka was thinking years ahead.

In his view, it is the Bemis Center's duty to embrace any and all enthusiasts of contemporary art, regardless of age or financial security. More than any other program at the Bemis Center — and the past year has seen numerous Bemis programs in a head-spinning rotation — the Underground serves as a seed for the community's long-term development.

Since his arrival in 2003, Masuoka and his staff have taken an aggressive approach to the local arts scene. Weeks after the Bar Codes opening and fresh from his visit to New York for The Gates display in Central Park, the director sat in his office and spoke about his intentions to make the Bemis Center the conduit for contemporary arts in Omaha.

“If we wait around for it to happen, it won't,” Masuoka said. “There has to be some kind of bigger strategy in place to promote the visual arts in Omaha. It's going to take a group effort, and we have a really great opportunity to take the lead.”

For years the Bemis Center existed, in the words of its most ardent supporters, as “the best kept secret in Omaha,” constantly infusing new contemporary art and artists into town through an internationally known residency program. Recipients of Bemis residencies have been lured from all over the world by the opportunity to spend three months working on their art without worrying about rent, studio space or resources. It is the reason, according to local hyperbole, that the Bemis Center is better-known in parts of Berlin than parts of Omaha — a half-truth that Masuoka aims to quell.

“I loved this place before I even came,” he said. “My wife and I were residents, so I already got it. I knew how great this place was. I just want everyone else to know. It could sound kind of like a marketing thing, but it's just that you find something great and you want to tell someone about it. People come here and they spend their time to come and find us and drive here from wherever. I always want them to have a great experience. I never want them to leave saying, ‘That was a total waste of time.’”

Slowly but surely, Masuoka has built up a staff dedicated to expanding the center's existing programs, in particular its lecture series, ongoing exhibits and community projects. Less than two years into the Masuoka administration, the Bemis Center is experiencing a rash of activity. In January, the Underground opened. In February, the center announced a new fellowship

awarded biannually to local artists who will be granted free studio space, access to all Bemis facilities and a monthly stipend of \$1,000. In March, Bemis officials revealed the names of six sculptors selected for a high-profile public art project to be located outside the Qwest Center.

That same month, the center hosted a reception for potential donors to the “Bench Marks” project, which will put artist-designed bus stops on corners throughout the city — a sort of functional J. Doe project.

“The type of audience we’ll get is far greater than we could ever expect to walk into our facility,” Masuoka said of both the Bench Marks and Qwest Center projects. “We’re taking the art to them. I don’t even know how you can measure that type of audience.”

Meanwhile the Bemis Center continues its monthly ArtTalk lecture series. Throw in the center’s exhibition program and a handful of other projects in the works, and it’s easy to assume Masuoka and company are ready to collapse from fatigue.

In truth, they’re just hitting their stride. “That building year is always the hardest year,” Masuoka said. “You know what it can be, but it takes a lot of patience to get to that point.”

Within the center’s offices, staffers describe a sensation of being on the ground floor of something important. At the direction of Masuoka, they are encouraged to think big. Staff meetings, held every Tuesday, often turn into free-form exchanges of ideas, possibilities and philosophies. Day-to-day details are addressed quickly, Masuoka said, to make room for loftier dialogues on the direction of the arts in Omaha. Their projects — the gallery exhibitions, the residency program, the lecture series, the public art initiatives, the new fellowship — are all viewed as pieces to a larger puzzle.

“Now we’re really talking about putting the rubber to the road,” Masuoka said. “More and more I view it as our mission to go out there and be that group that helps push this along. It’s happening. People are already stepping up. I see in the next year, year and a half, we’re all going to witness a huge transformation in the visual arts community that will be totally new for the city.

“If it was just a matter of bringing another art venue, it probably wouldn’t interest me,” he added, referring to the Underground. “But we’re really talking about changing and revitalizing a neighborhood.”

If such thoughts sound vaguely familiar, it is the language of

Richard Florida that Masuoka speaks. Perhaps the most celebrated social scientist in the past decade, Florida is credited for coining the term “creative class.” In his view, which has been accepted so widely that it’s spawned an inevitable backlash, a city does well, quite well in fact, by embracing its creative types and providing them an environment in which to flourish. It’s the reason, believers suggest, that Portland is Portland and Cincinnati isn’t. Closer analyses of Florida’s theories reveal peculiarities, but his general thesis is difficult to dispute. It is a verifiable fact, on display in numerous metropolitan areas across the country that artists contribute immensely to the growth of cities — and not only with their paintings and music and interpretive dancing. No, they contribute in the very manner that makes a city councilperson’s heart pound: development.

Before a rundown neighborhood can become a thriving hot spot of swanky restaurants and stylish boutiques, someone has to move in and do the dirty work. Enticed by low rents and unafraid to get their hands dirty, artists tend to fill that role. They open studios. They rent apartments. They buy distressed buildings and rehab them into something — decent.

Because business tends to follow heads, more development occurs. The neighborhood gets a reputation as something on the rise, so developers swoop in (often with tax breaks). Soon enough, an area no one wanted to touch turns trendy. Rents rise. Sometimes the artists move out, sometimes not. Either way, the city’s tax base gets a little boost. Then, someplace else, someplace totally unexpected, it happens again.

Thousands of people have bought into this phenomenon, among them Masuoka, who saw it happen in parts of Denver. So it is that he equates the Bemis Center’s vision with community-wide improvement. The more opportunities it provides for artists and art lovers, the better the environment; the better the environment, the more likely that similar projects will occur.

“If anyone is going to greatly benefit from what we do, it is the local arts community,” he said. “So we’ve taken a pretty serious role to support them and made it one of our biggest initiatives in the last year — that we are going to be part of the growth in this arts community.”

To be sure, others have already stepped up. Within walking distance of the Bemis Center, there are the newer galleries of darkRoom, Fluxion and At the Loft, then there are the standbys of Jackson Artworks and Garden of the Zodiac, and finally a few more blocks west on Leavenworth stands Gallery 72 . North of downtown, the sprawling Hot Shops Art Center stands as an

impressive incubator of contemporary art.

On a different, grander scale, the Joslyn Art Museum has re-established its commitment to contemporary art. "We're not the center of the contemporary universe, but on the other hand, it is quite an active and vibrant community," said Brooks Joyner, director of the museum. "I think there is on the horizon a really exciting growth in that area."

Last fall, the venerable art institution underwent a staffing shake-up, in part to make room for a senior-level curator position dedicated to modern and contemporary art acquisitions and exhibitions. Months into the hunt, director Brooks Joyner told *The Reader* the museum still isn't close to filling the job but would like to announce a name by the end of the year.

The curatorial position, Joyner said, reflects in some ways the museum's interest in promoting and expanding its contemporary collection. "We certainly want this person to travel widely and engage collectors both in and outside of Omaha," he said, adding that the museum expects to put on at least one major contemporary exhibit annually.

In recent years, Joslyn has depended heavily on the support and expertise of prized patron Phillip Schrager, whose private collection of contemporary art ranks among the region's best. For the contemporary wing of Joslyn to grow, however, the museum needs more supporters whose interest lie primarily in modern and cutting-edge works. "We're talking about an area in contemporary art that requires some champions," Joyner said.

The director hopes a series of exhibits throughout 2005 will galvanize such support, starting with a dual exhibit opening this weekend (see *Arts*, p. 28).

Even with Joslyn's steady strides in the contemporary art scene, Joyner cited the Bemis Center as the community leader in that regard, an institution that's brought fresh voices and styles to Omaha for years. According to Masuoka, the time has come to embrace and promote local artists as well.

"The reason we did Underground was that we weren't going to wait five years for somebody else to step up and say, 'I'm going to open up an alternative space and give artists opportunities.' [We] figured we have the space, let's just do it. We maybe jumped into it a little headfirst, but we did it all with the right intentions, which was to give everyone a little bit of motivation and say, 'Let's get this ball rolling.'"

From its earliest stages, the Bemis Underground became the

unusual province of Jeremy Stern, assistant director to Masuoka. The concept was not just to open a new space but to essentially turn that space over to local artists interested in learning the ins and outs and ups and downs of curating a major show.

“I try to keep an eye on it without being involved too much,” Stern said. “We don’t want to have the Bemis’ hands all over this. It was always meant to be something they managed, something the community managed for themselves.”

For the uncertainty that surrounded the project, the Underground brought nothing but good fortune in its infancy. First it helped earn the Bemis Center an \$80,000 grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Next Blake opened the season with a bang, drawing both foot traffic and extensive media attention to the newly launched gallery.

The process, however, has not gone without its share of reality checks. With three weeks to go until the season’s second exhibit, Bemis officials chose to cancel the show being organized by artist Josh Lux. The cancellation leaves a hefty gap between Bar Codes and the following show, a multimedia installation by husband-and-wife team Jody Boyer and Russ Nordham, which will now open May 13.

“It’s still a growing process,” Masuoka said. “We’re discovering stuff all the time about how best we can work with the curators. There are a few bumps in the road that we’re going through right now, but we’re reviewing projects for next year, and it’s going to make us stronger because we’re going to know how to approach it a lot better.”

On the closing night of Bring Your Bar Codes, it became clear that the Underground, and by extension the Bemis Center, was not yet able to merely snap its fingers and watch the artsy hordes come running. In total contrast to the festive opening, the closing ceremony attracted only random clumps of people, meandering in and out of the space as shapeless, avant-garde electronica managed to make the place seem even emptier than it was.

Everything felt a little bit spent, including Blake himself, who had invested a good part of his time (not to mention cash) into the month-long exhibition. And, for a show featuring thousands of bar codes, perhaps that was appropriate.

The time had come for something else, someone else ready and willing to take the lead from Blake’s trailblazing run. Another local artist, who in turn will be replaced by the next, followed by another and then the one after that.

“All artists need is a reason to stay,” Masuoka said. “They need a job, a place to show their work, to do their art. If you provide these opportunities for them, you’re going to start building communities. If you don’t provide it, they’re going to go elsewhere to find jobs or they’re going to show their work somewhere else. Ultimately they’re going to leave if there’s no reason in the world to stay.”

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