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We've Arrived

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Omaha's art scene burst at the seams in 2007

by Sarah Baker

If 2006 was the year Omaha's art scene stuck to its course, 2007 was the year it exploded with possibility.

This year offered more of everything: artists, galleries, viewers, collaborations, opportunity. Looking back at Reader art coverage in '07, there is too much to mention. Here goes.

Select Cuts, a succinct show at west Omaha's Jewish Community Center early in the year included three young artists that continue to challenge Midwestern aesthetic: Joey Lynch, Jake Gillespie and Peggy Gomez. Lynch moved to Omaha in 2007, snuggled himself in the basement of the Bemis Center and got creative. It's been a big year for him; he did visuals on Bright Eyes' world tour, continued to collaborate with Saddle Creek, became a fixture at the Bemis and just opened his first solo show in the city at Pulp in Benson.

Gillespie continued to thrive, curating a show at Lincoln's Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery that included many new paintings from his own hand, and garnering his first Kansas City show. Gomez stayed the course with her Lincoln art store, Gomez Art Supply, in its new, more visible downtown location. She showed in the Bemis Underground and the Sheldon. What is in the future for the original "Tugboat three" remains unanswered as Lincoln's gallery wunderkind, the Tugboat, remains closed after many proposed opening dates came and went. Let's hope it returns in '08.

Many good shows hit the Bemis walls: Michele Kong and Amanda Knowles had great showings, and later, Martin Morehouse's Through the Sausage Factory presented challenging art that didn't take itself too seriously. Bemis' Annual Art Auction was the biggest ever, drawing more than 700 people and \$400,000.

The Bemis Underground surged forward, showing many unknowns and giving locals the chance to shine. Memorable moments include Nic Bartlett and Rachel Ziegler collaborating for Remainder, Nolan Tredway's collaborative effort and Bart Vargas' solo show.

New galleries seemed to open every few months. Midtown's Avenue Gallery closed, but the space quickly took on new life when Jean Imray opened the Dundee Gallery. Vera Mercer's Moving Gallery took a firm hold this year, making its place in the community with several shows in the old Bemis building.

Rob Gilmer, who owns the Sunday brunch spot du jour Dixie Quicks with partner Rene Orduna, opened his RNG Gallery next door with work from friend and fellow artist Sora Kimberlain. He will show his photography to kick off 2008.

This month, Brigitte McQueen opened the aforementioned Pulp, a paper store and gallery in the thriving Benson neighborhood. The space is clearly an extension of its owner: warm, creative and friendly, and the opening was among the strongest of the year, featuring Lynch's new work on paper.

Artist-in-residence programs grew outside the Bemis. Nomad Lounge opened an art space and started a residency program. The bar features a monthly show, complete with opening event. Artists show for free and donate a portion of sales to Omaha's homeless community. The Omaha Children's Museum built an artist studio into its renovation and now has a residency program: Sculptor Marcia Joffe-Bouska was the first to teach Omaha's children hands-on art appreciation there.

The area's power players didn't disappoint. Sheldon used its construction woes as a chance to give artists much-needed space in the three-part series "Sheldon Connections." These were among the best of the year. It's clear the artists chosen to curate and exhibit in Sheldon (Jamie Burmeister, Sue Knight, Ann Gradwohl, Tim Guthrie, Gomez, Gillespie, Michael Burton, Tredway, Eddie Dominguez, Caitlin Applegate and Leslie Iwai, among others) saw it as an opportunity and honor. The work was top notch, innovative and challenging. Three other Sheldon shows were fantastic: Comic Art from the Permanent Collection, Chris Ware and The Comic Vision of Charley Friedman.

Joslyn Art Museum also embraced change, bringing in an exhibit from the New Orleans Museum of Art in place of a cancelled Russian art exhibition. It was a great move. Spared from the Storm: Masterworks from the New Orleans Museum of Art spanned centuries in its scope. A portion of proceeds went to support the New Orleans Museum, a victim of Hurricane Katrina.

This year some of the area's finest art professionals migrated to Omaha. Former Sheldon Curator Dan Siedell became an art history professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and plans to make his presence known in the classroom and community. Omaha native and architect Tom Trenolone returned and made a splash with Design Alliance Omaha. The group debuted with a packed house to hear the forward-thinking global perspective of designer Bruce Mau. Trenolone has big plans for Omaha's creative class.



Omaha began to take art seriously with its most significant public art project: 22 O! sculptures whose creators took a stab at being more artistic than kitsch and did a fine job. The project offers an interesting look at what artists do with public art when left to their own devices. They make excellent, challenging work. Late in the year, Omaha found a bit of a public art scandal on its hands with the relocation of Leslie Iwai's permanent public art piece "Sounding Stones." The city persevered, and the piece is being installed this week in its new midtown home, Elmwood Park. Thanks are due to the city (and all its corporate and non-profit partners and participating artists) for working hard to give us beautiful art to look at in 2007.

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