

The Case for a Strong Art-Gallery Scene

Written by Leslie Bell

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I've been thinking more than usual lately about the local art-gallery scene, for three reasons: a citywide open studio I attended earlier this summer in St. Louis with 151 venues; [David Burke's September 13 column in the Quad-City Times](#)

in which he asked what's missing in the Quad Cities and suggested a gallery or two for the College Hill area currently under development; and a recent Quad Cities conference on networking among local art and cultural agencies.

I've called Davenport home since I moved from Washington, DC, 45 years ago, and as happy as I've been here, I've always missed a gallery scene.

The gallery I'm speaking of is a business that "represents" its artists, which is to say that the artists are chosen for the high quality of their work and according to a principled and focused policy - "young, emerging Midwest abstract painters," "modern and contemporary Expressionism," "21st Century works on paper," "the best in the two-state region," etc.

Furthermore, that's all they do. They don't sell frames. They don't sell supplies. They specialize. This is the sort of galleries that one finds in Minneapolis, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and Tampa, but not here. I mention these cities because they're the same size as the Quad Cities.

Because this kind of gallery survives by selling art, its staff spends considerable time drumming up visibility for its artists - contacting the media, calling collectors and museums, networking, getting the art and the word out. An artist's solo show is sometimes accompanied by an

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illustrated catalog promoting the artist and the gallery that's mailed nationally to individuals and influential institutions. Additionally, you can visit the gallery Web site and find out all sorts of things about the artists and see images of their work. Files are kept at the gallery so that the history of the artist can be examined in detail by interested visitors. When the artists' work isn't on display in a show, it's available in special storage-viewing areas so that visitors can always count on being able to see it. The gallery is home for the artist.

This summer's issue of *Art in America* - the art magazine with the largest U.S. circulation - lists 5,243 galleries nationwide, and not one is from the Quad Cities. In New York City, there are more than 60 galleries that begin with the letter "A." Chicago lists 136 galleries, probably half the real number because it doesn't include the startups that grow mushroom-like in the soon-to-be-gentrified neighborhoods. Kansas City has more than 30.

I urge the movers and shakers of our area of 400,000 to find a way to support a gallery scene. We have lots of excellent art-related businesses and individual artists' studios, plus a brave set of precedents for what I'm talking about: Maka and the Peanut Gallery in Rock Island, Slowfish/Gallery West, Mode, and Kanga in Davenport, and perhaps a few more. Maka closed in the 1970s. The others are sorely missed spaces from the recent past. So now we have none of what other metropolitan areas have in spades.

Why does this matter? Why is it important to have galleries that stand for the work of carefully chosen artists? What does it do for a town? It shows a connection with the art world and an awareness of how things are run and are made to succeed in the world at large. It's a complement to parochial pride and a way of explaining, visually, the ideals and ideas of an area while displaying its best.

Furthermore, out-of-town museum curators often choose artists for their shows after seeing their work in this sort of gallery. They know by the quality and aim of the gallery the kinds of art they are apt to find there. This relationship of gallery to museum is helpful to the artist (higher hometown profile equals more sales), and it brings prestige to the area. And, of course, the public sees and gets to know the best art in the area and the people who make it. In this roundabout way, everyone gains in either education, financial support, prestige, or all of the above.

The Impressionists Monet and Degas were initially despised by Parisians. Now they're some of the best-loved artists in the world. Thank goodness they had dealers who believed in them and

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represented their work over time. As it stands, the most advanced artists in our area are given the least exposure and, ironically, their work often needs the most exposure to be understood. Our college and university professors, graduate students, and MFAs are largely invisible here. Their work is created in series or in related batches deeply developing an idea and, other than at galleries attached to educational institutions and the Figge Art Museum, these artists aren't comfortable showing their work at the local venues - good places but inappropriate. Most often, these artists show out-of-town.

Of course, a gallery can't stay in business if the public doesn't like and buy what's represented; that's a given. But if leaders in an area can see the usefulness of such a businesses, they can devise ways to sustain them until the public familiarizes themselves with the work.

All of our downtowns and areas under development (such as the Harrison Street hill area targeted for revitalization) would do well to keep the benefits of a gallery scene in mind as they proceed. Because I live in Davenport, I'd *love* to see the Figge surrounded by galleries and shops.

In my experience, it takes a forward-thinking consortium from the business and arts communities to devise a strategy to secure some turf and start a concentrated arts area. Locally, that would be the Iowa Quad City Chamber of Commerce (formerly DavenportOne), the Figge, local colleges and universities (and their respective art, business, and marketing programs), realtors, collectors, members of the tourist-attracting tribe, and perhaps some state agencies. Other cities' gallery areas - SoHo, Chelsea, River North, West Loop, Baltimore Avenue, and Newberry Street - started from nothing. One has to look no further than Des Moines to see how this works. West Des Moines, Ingersol Avenue, the East Village - these areas are blooming!

Entrepreneurial spirit, community idealism, and long-range business and marketing acumen are needed, as well as corporate underwriting, help securing grants, free or reduced rents, suggestions for rough-but-developing real estate, etc. I'm talking about a group effort. Current MBAs: Have you considered starting an art gallery?

It's happened elsewhere, and it can happen here. We are a "city" of 400,000, and we need to start thinking like one.

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