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COMMENT

Hesse McGraw's vision and art will be missed

Financial concerns lead former Paragraph director to New York

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When Hesse McGraw left Kansas City in late September to become assistant director of the Max Protetch Gallery in New York City, he left behind a very different art scene than the one he entered in 2002 as a writer and editor for *Review* magazine.

Its present vitality and scope are thanks in part to McGraw's own hard work, vision and dedication— as an artist, writer and director of the Urban Culture Project's Paragraph gallery.

In his three years on the Kansas City art scene, McGraw, a native of Olathe and a 2001 graduate of the University of Kansas, contributed articles and reviews to *Review*, *The Kansas City Star* and national arts magazines *RES* and *Art Papers*.

At Paragraph, which McGraw founded in Lawrence in September 2002 and moved to Kansas City in 2003, he blurred the boundaries of fine art, architecture and design and demonstrated a flair for creating visual dialogues.

He showcased local artists and brought in shows by internationally known artists such as Christian Jankowski and Shepard Fairey. He also secured exhibitions for Kansas City artists in Chicago, Tulsa, Miami and Topeka, resulting in sales and solo show opportunities for individual artists.

This past summer McGraw organized "What's the Matter With Kansas?" an exhibit of Kansas City art at Rare gallery in New York.

The show so impressed the directors at Max Protetch that they offered McGraw a position.

McGraw said he "didn't take it seriously at the time," but a growing concern with financial survival led him to reconsider.

"It's the same story that so many people go through trying to make it as an art professional in Kansas City," he said. "When it doesn't translate into a living wage it becomes disorienting.

"Kansas City is an amazing place to be an artist," McGraw added. "There is an incredibly tight-knit artist community, but so little support from the collecting community. Despite the awards that exist, nobody's activity is sustainable until there are sales being made."

McGraw expressed concern that without sufficient financial support, Kansas City's visual arts bubble may burst.

"Some big shifts have to happen in order to convince the upcoming generation that it is worthwhile to stay in Kansas City and establish a career here."

McGraw has already learned what the biggest difference is between the New York and Kansas City gallery environments.

"In New York it's all about the money," he said. "The market sets a lot of parameters on what is shown and critically discussed. All things being equal, I think that being away from the market is a healthier means of art production, but obviously you can't sustain without that."

It's fitting that Paragraph's most ambitious undertaking to date — this fall's exhibition exchange with the London-based Rocket gallery— was McGraw's final curatorial effort in Kansas City. McGraw and Rocket owner/director Jonathan Stephenson joined forces to bring the work of Rocket artists to Kansas City and Kansas City artists to London.

McGraw said that it is the sense of community that he will miss most about Kansas City.

"There's an artist, Tom Marioni, who said the greatest work of art is sharing a beer between friends," he said. "There is that real kind of camaraderie in Kansas City."

As for the future of Paragraph? In the absence of a director, the management of the space will be absorbed into the Urban Culture Project umbrella. Shows planned through 2006 will remain on the schedule.