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Raised Profile

Kansas City finally gets its due for its contribution to the visual arts and its lively gallery scene

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star



KEITH MYERS/The Kansas City Star

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StarPeregrine Honig Artist
Peregrine Honig's designer
panties shop, Birdie's, is a
Crossroads destination. Her
artwork is collected locally and
nationally.



FRED BLOCHER/The Kansas City Star

FRED BLOCHER/The Kansas City Star
KE-SOOK LEE Artist Ke-Sook Lee has attracted the
attention of, among others, New York art dealer
George Billis. Billis visited her studio recently to
discuss an upcoming exhibit of her work at his
Chelsea gallery.



File photo

File photo DAVID FORD
Kansas City painter and
performance artist David
Ford recently received an
\$8,000 award.

The word is spreading that Kansas City has one of the most vibrant visual arts cultures *not* on a coast.

"It's quite an art scene out there now," observed New York art dealer Bill Brady, a Kansas City native and Art Institute alum. "I made it on a First Friday by chance, and I was really amazed at what's going on."

In late November *USA Today* published an article about "three burgeoning art districts outside the Big Apple that are worth a detour." The Crossroads Art District got top billing in the piece, written by Philadelphia-based travel writer Gene Sloan.

Sloan was tipped about KC's lively gallery culture by Melissa Rountree, curator of the Hallmark Fine Art Collection, and Laren Mahoney, communications manager at the Convention and Visitors Bureau of Greater Kansas City.

"With Laren as a guide, I spent a First Friday wandering around, checking out galleries, stores etc. and was quite impressed," Sloan said recently. "I must say Kansas City is a wonderful surprise for an art lover."

In recent months, stories about the Crossroads also have run in the *Omaha World-Herald* and *National Geographic Traveler*.

"When journalists ask what's new and unique in Kansas City, the Crossroads Art District is something I push," Mahoney said, "because I love that area and because it's such a great unique asset to the city."

As visiting arts professionals and tourism experts talk up the city as an arts hub, individual Kansas City artists are spreading the word by racking up appearances in national publications and big-city exhibits. In the last six months:

- Kansas City artist Ke-Sook Lee was featured in a four-page color spread in *American Craft* magazine.
- Eric Sall, a recent KCAI grad who began graduate school at Virginia Commonwealth University last fall, received a prestigious \$20,000 grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation in New York.

- Kansas City artist David Ford received an \$8,000 award for outstanding achievement from the Boston-based Tanne Foundation.
- Kansas City artist Peregrine Honig and her West Bottoms building were highlighted in an article in the 500,000-circulation *Budget Living Magazine*.
- Kansas City designers Rie Egawa and Burgess Zbryk landed a four-page spread, including images of their Sweater Lamp, Puzzle Screen and String Chair, in a new design book, *Dish: International Design for the Home*, published by Princeton Architectural Press.
- Public artworks by Kansas City artists James Woodfill and Matt Dehaemers were featured in the Public Art Network's 2004 Year in Review, a project of Americans for the Arts and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies. The review featured the ghostly streetcar Dehaemers created for the 2003 Avenue of the Arts and Woodfill's kinetic lightwork for one of the terminal garages at KCI.
- The authoritative Web-based magazine *Artnet*, singled out the Kansas City contingent at the Scope Miami art fair, with remarks and pictures about Hesse McGraw, Jordan Nickel and Seth Johnson.
- *Artnet* struck again in February with a picture of a be-suited Tim Brown, director of Kansas City's Telephonebooth gallery, at the Art L.A. art fair. The accompanying article remarked on the gallery's "youthful and unfettered" atmosphere and "energetic, crafty and makeshift" work.

Several Kansas City artists are having exhibits in New York this season, upping the city's profile in the art capital of the world. From March 25 to April 24, Art Miller will show images from his "Habana Series" at Bill Brady's ATM Gallery.

Since he opened ATM in the East Village 11 years ago, Brady has given shows to several artists who live or were trained in Kansas City, including Chris Ketchie, Jimmy Lane and Vince Roark.

"One of my ideas about opening a gallery in New York was being able to offer people I knew outside of New York a chance to participate," he said. "I've had quite a great success with Kansas City artists here."

ATM's fall show of Peter Caine, a lively presence on the KC art scene until he moved to New York in 1995, was reviewed in the *New York Times*. So was its 2002 exhibit of Roark, who went on to have a one-person show at Jack Hanley Gallery in San Francisco last December.

This spring Brady is moving ATM to 511 W. 20th St., in the burgeoning Chelsea gallery district. Miller's "Habana Series," of haunting black-and-white photographs shot at the Habana Inn gay resort in Oklahoma City, will be his opening exhibit.

"I was taken with it. It was really something different than what other photographers are doing," Brady said. "I thought the subject matter was great; it was eerie, mysterious, provocative. It was also very sexy."

The show has attracted advance coverage in *Genre*, a New York-based lifestyle magazine for gay men. The March issue features an article about the exhibit with a large reproduction of one of the photographs.

On April 5, Ke-Sook Lee, known for her delicate embroidered artworks addressing women's issues, will open a one-person exhibit at the George Billis Gallery in New York.

"If I show in New York, New York is not my only audience," Lee said recently. "New York attracts people from all over the world. They are very open-minded, and you get honest feedback. That's a very exciting feeling."

This is Lee's second show at Billis' New York gallery in Chelsea, and in October she will have her first exhibit at the gallery's Los Angeles branch.

Billis came to Kansas City last month to choose work for Lee's exhibits. "What I like about her work is the way she uses traditional means in untraditional ways," he said. "She's really creating art with a new voice."

During his visit Billis made the rounds of the city's alternative spaces, including the Telephonebooth and the Urban Culture Project. He also spent time with painter Tom Greg, who will have his third show with Billis in spring 2006.

Hesse McGraw, meanwhile, is winding down from his first New York show. In February he exhibited a video work, "The Price Is Always Right!" at Rare gallery. The piece featured footage from different international versions of the popular television show projected on a screen on a movable door.

It took a week to install, said Rare gallery owner Peter Surace, but the result was a "simple and elegant installation" with an audio component that sounded "like the Tower of Babel."

This summer Rare will present a group show of eight Kansas City artists organized by McGraw. It's called "What's the Matter With Kansas" and will include works by Seth Johnson, Sean Ward, Miles Neidinger, Jill Noone, Eric von Robertson and Jordan Nickel.

All of this activity is grist for Larry Stone, vice president for enrollment management at the Kansas City Art Institute.

"We're out to dispel the rumor that the only way you can go to a school with a robust art scene is if you're on the East or West Coast," Stone said. "I've seen it grow each year, and never have we had so much to talk about as we have this year."

Emerging Kansas City artist and recent KCAI grad Ryan Fenchell is an admissions counselor for the school.

"The vibrant arts scene is a huge selling point for the Art Institute," Fenchell said. "There is a strong sense of community here between the artists, curators etc., and everyone seems to feed off each other's energy."

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The study of art

Kansas City also is making its mark in the field of art scholarship.

Frances Connelly, a professor of art history at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, is fast emerging as an authority on the grotesque in art, a topic of renewed interest in both academia and the museum world.

In fall 2003, Cambridge University Press published her Modern Art and the Grotesque. Last fall Connelly helped formulate the exhibit "Comic Grotesque: Wit and Mockery in German Art," shown at the Neue Galerie in New York. She also contributed to the exhibition catalog.

"There were two Americans who wrote for it; Robert Storr was the other one," she said. "It was a really international project."

Connelly is preparing to sign an advance contract with a major fine arts press for a second book. This one will trace the history of the grotesque in Western art.

— Alice Thorson

KEE SOOK LEE

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