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Joe Bussell at City Ice Arts.



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John O'Brien Closes Dolphin Gallery. What's Next is already Happening

By **BLAIR SCHULMAN**

After 24 years and four locations, John O'Brien's Dolphin Gallery is closing its doors but rather than mourn its passing, consider it an opportunity for visual art culture in Kansas City. Dolphin Gallery is a space that has shown great work over the years and it will be missed. However, the majestic status of the traditional "white cube" is in need of a transformation and now is the time for Kansas City, with its wealth of raw space and smart thinkers, to continue implementing ideas in unusual places that demand richer, stranger, and more innovative curatorial themes.

Kansas City is in the benefit column creatively and geographically. Rather than run off immediately after completing art degrees, artists tend to stay behind for the low-end housing stock and lower-end studio space. A sword of Damocles may hang over the miasma of the visual art culture with the risk of losing emerging talent due to Kansas City's lack of an MFA program and the cultural community should be worried.

Though remote from the country's art centers, being dead center in the country, our artists can take advantage of living and making work here. They have the ability to haul their work to larger art cities like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles in a matter of hours — a respectable place in the North American arts ecosystem.

With the demise of Dolphin and the musical chairs in local arts institutions in the last several years, the question remains: does the pristine "white cube" environment equate to blue chip work? Why would Kansas City mimic such an ideal at all? Artist Carla Malone Steck says, "I started a nonprofit ten years ago because I actually hate galleries and white cubes, wanted to get the art out to the people, the common man, so to speak. I still see Kansas City unfortunately tied to the white cube and artists still putting faith in the cube."

There are other environments to consider. Artist Garry Noland says, "We have some great not-for-profit, academic galleries and artist-run spaces. (Is there) Somebody (who) can step in here ... Belger (Arts Center)? The Corporate Art Fund? Doug Drake and Elizabeth Kirsch are also in the mix." Drake and Kirsch, (married partners) owned a gallery at 45th Street and State Line Road in the 1970s and before that, 57th Street in New York City....says Noland, "they are both highly perceptive, intuitive and visually savvy people and still dealing art privately."

City Ice Arts (2015 Campbell) continues to build a steady following, and has the large, cube-like space often necessary for large pieces, but is still sought after by those less flexible as the sole environment in which to view it. Within this historic building are growing, local businesses that bring in a steady stream of people too. But such environments take money. Often a lot of it and what is a young, emerging artist or gallerist to do? There are places one can turn to for funding. That takes time and the art is piling up. There are not-for-profits, but so much of this type of funding comes with strings attached. That convention betrays the artistic ideology of doing what you want or making someone else happy first to satisfy a funding requirement.

Artist/illustrator Geo Sipp says, "Artist Inc. (AI) has been strongly supportive of building an artist community that is aware of how to be a professional in the creative professions. Having spent a number of years in Atlanta and using it as a point of comparison, it seems to me that



Exterior of Front Space.





Kansas City is much more cohesive in its support of the arts community. While the closure of The Dolphin is noteworthy, the visual arts in Kansas City will continue to grow and be nationally influential."

To explain the AI program: "Artist INC is a collaborative partnership of Charlotte Street Foundation, Arts Council of Metropolitan Kansas City, and University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) Innovation Center. Artist INC connects Kansas City artists of all disciplines to the tools, resources, and opportunities necessary to develop their entrepreneurial skills and strengthen their artistic practice."

What Kansas City needs more of are people prone to creative risk-taking and being consistent as much as possible. It is not enough to open your doors; they must stay open so the people will come. **PLUG projects** (1613 Genessee St.), an artist run space well into its second year, presents free, varied programming between their exhibitions.

Other innovators that are, or continue to, make the most of what is available to them comprises a healthy list. An example is Timothy Amundsen and Brandon Frederick of **The Roost** (1100 Sante Fe) in the West Bottoms. With their first exhibition already underway, the dark, raw cavern-like space with its unfinished walls and floors is where you can let down your hair. **Front/Space** (217 W. 18th Street) is another artist-run gallery. Tim Brown's **Telephonebooth Gallery** (3319 Troost) has been showing work since 1995. The tiny space, where everyone seems to congregate around the wood burning stove after viewing the work, feels more like a 19th Century salon, with good conversation and a distinct lack of pretense.

What we could do without are the international and local empire builders. The Gagosians and the Saatchis of the world who gum up the messy, sexy creative process that spits, inspires and pisses on your rug. Even with its pockets of wealth and funding, Kansas City is not that kind of town, nor should it aspire to that, either.

The outstanding reaction to the end of Dolphin Gallery is dismay. However, their role in the renaissance of Kansas City's artistic culture will long be remembered. Kansas City, don't mourn. Run with their great legacy: go for the longevity, the expression of sight and sound where it is about having a good time and don't spend what you don't have. Money and respect may follow. But remember, if you're not first, you're last. Let's not blow it and drown in the swamp of sameness by imitating what is already gone. What makes us unique is what keeps our community special.

Interior of Dolphin Gallery.





Telephonebooth exterior.



Interior of the Roost.