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One less alternative

Lesson of KM art: Gallery's doors often on verge of swinging shut

By **MARY LOUISE SCHUMACHER**
mschumacher@journalsentinel.com

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For the nearly eight years it's been open, Kent Mueller has fancied this motto for his art gallery: "Difficult to find, impossible to park."

Advertisement

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After Friday it will simply be impossible to find.

KM art, one of the Milwaukee's longest-running alternative art spaces, is going to shutter its little nook in the world down by the train tracks at 226 S. 1st St. in Walker's Point.

"There's a list of reasons to stay open and a list of reasons to close," says Mueller, who has shown contemporary

and self-taught artists, mostly from this area. "The list of reasons to close is finally longer than the reasons to stay open."

Money issues top Mueller's time-to-give-it-up list.

His rent has steadily crept up, art sales have always been sporadic and he's in hock, particularly to the artists he's exhibited.

Still, KM art lasted longer than most improvised art spaces, the types of venues that get their start in forgotten factories or even living rooms and attics.

An inability to make ends meet is almost always a forgone conclusion for these types of venues, but that's beside the point for the artists and curators who can't seem to help themselves.

What motivates such creative die-hards differs, but people like Mueller and spaces like KM art form a quiet but essential strata of Milwaukee's art scene. It's where some of the most relevant art and ideas are exchanged and exist.

Gallery Scene



Photo/Mark Hoffman

Kent Mueller's tale is a microcosm of the alternative art scene. His galleries open and close, they don't make a lot of money and they show art that might not have another home. Before he ran KM art, which will be shuttered Friday, he owned two other galleries. Mueller doesn't plan for KM to be his last.



Greer Oaks Gallery gave refuge to ABEA, which meant Tiffany Nicole Slade's "Pray for the Woman You Are" had a prayer of being seen.



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But it's a fragile layer, too, that often seems on the verge of evaporation, as galleries close and artists pack up for other cities.

"I think it is hard to find spaces that have that energy, that show work that isn't a guarantee of anything," says John Riepenhoff, who recently opened the Green Gallery at 631 E. Center St.

"I'm not looking to make money," says Riepenhoff, a more optimistic and younger version of Mueller. "I'm just looking to celebrate ideas . . . I'm showing work because it's interesting."

Riepenhoff's Green Gallery exists in a larger, third-floor industrial space that he rents along with other artists. Behind the white-walled, petite gallery are artists' studios and a gathering area with old chairs and couches where experimental film events are sometimes held.

Sharing the financial burden, though in slightly different ways, has worked for other galleries. It is what got the M-80 artists' cooperative off the ground in the Third Ward, what made the Seventh Floor Studios in Bay View a viable community of artists that have shown together and is the way Mike Brenner of Hotcakes Gallery is going with another in-the-works cooperative space on the east side.

Riepenhoff supports himself by working as an assistant to fine-art painters Scott and Tyson Reeder, doing odd jobs like cabinet making and working on commissioned paintings.

"I don't count it in hours," he says of the time he puts into the gallery. "If I counted the hours, I don't know, it'd be a lot."

Riepenhoff doesn't make fashionable finds in typical places such as art school thesis shows or recent issues of *New American Paintings*.

"I saw these little advertisements, you know, items for sale, cars for sale," he says, of one encounter at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee student union.

"This one individual had created these really interesting drawings of a lamp . . . a nice little drawing colored in with colored pencil with a little plug coming out of it," he says. "It was for sale for \$3. The actual for-sale card had more value."

So Riepenhoff called the number on the ad, not to buy the lamp, but to entice the graduate student in linguistics from Japan to show him more of the tiny sketches. She was getting ready to move to Australia, actually, and had several of them.

The lamps and other objects that were for sale became part of the exhibit, too, he says.

"Being a curator, in some cases, you take on the role of the artist," he says, "where you find these things and . . . people can look at them in a different way."

The Jody Monroe Gallery, run by sisters Kiki and Mali Anderson and open for about three years, is one flight below the Green Gallery in an old Riverwest structure. It was an inspiration for Riepenhoff.

The sisters, who have an artist mother and who have lived in several cities, including Paris and Chicago, simply have artists as friends and know of good artists who are friends of friends.

"It was sort of natural," Kiki Anderson says of Jody Monroe, a pseudonym the Andersons had used for an earlier writing project. "It wasn't like this big decision. I don't think we were responding to any particular need in Milwaukee . . . We just decided to use the space we had and put a gallery in there."

The gallery, which also hosts literary events, often pairs local artists with others from places like Los Angeles, New York, Toronto and Mexico City.

It's been a reputable lineup, including Megan Whitmarsh, Chris Niver, Nicholas Frank, Stephanie Barber, Nathalie Shepherd, Maria Jose Goroza, James Franklin, Takahiro Kaneyama and others.

Some of these artists have gone on to great success.

Whitmarsh's wall hangers with tiny, embroidered monkeys sell for quite a bit more now, and



Sometimes life changes, rather than money, make galleries disappear. Sisters Kiki (left) and Mali Anderson may put their Jody Monroe Gallery on hiatus starting in July.



Photo/Mary Louise Schumacher

Cooperation is important to John Riepenhoff, who recently opened Green Gallery, and many others who want to make their way in the world of alternative art. His gallery is in an old building shared by a number of artists.

Multimedia

To listen to what Kiki Anderson, John Riepenhoff and Mike Brenner have to say about their galleries and to see slide shows of openings and exhibits for many of the galleries mentioned in this article.

 [Slideshow: Mike Brenner](#)

 [Slideshow: John Riepenhoff](#)

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 [Allison Halter at Jody Monroe](#)

James Franklin recently opened a show in New York.

With that kind of an eye, galleries like the Green Gallery and Jody Monroe could be prime targets for established, out-of-town curators on the prowl for the newest thing, today's avant-garde.

"I think the avant-garde is not the same thing at all that it used to be," says Kiki Anderson, who lives behind the gallery and teaches French to support herself. "I think people are looking for it all of the time, too, and I think they are looking for it too much . . . (that) sort of negates it."

Kiki found out a little more than a week ago that she got a teaching job in Bangkok, and Mali is pregnant and due in September, so the pair have just decided to put their gallery on hiatus after July.

They would like to pass along the space to someone else, Kiki says, though, perhaps under the same name, perhaps not.

That kind of passing of the baton is not uncommon here.

Not the typical experience

Monica Bennett has taken over Darling Hall, a campy, innovative performance art venue in Walker's Point that had been run for years by Theresa Columbus. Filmmaker Stephanie Barber's "Soup 'n' Cinema" experimental film events at her own space have morphed into "Movies and Marsala" at the Green Gallery space. Both Columbus and Barber have moved out of town.

Walking into Calvin Greer's century-old Victorian mansion in Brewers Hill is not the typical gallery experience.

Every wall and floor space, even the ceiling in his sitting room, is occupied by African artifacts and contemporary African-American art.

Five years ago or so, the top floor was spruced up as a place for Greer to show his own work to friends.

He creates wooden bowls with designs from ancient cultures and box-like drums that are derived from African drums.

Greer got the idea to put up the work of other artists, so they'd get a little exposure, too.

What he found was that while some galleries in town, such as the Peltz Gallery and DeLind Fine Art, do show African-American artists, there is an unmet demand.

So his cozy attic room became the Greer Oaks Gallery, 2463 N. Palmer St.

"Being a black artist in Milwaukee you know all of the other minority artists," Greer says. "It just sort of grew on its own."

The gallery, which makes some modest sales, is an important gathering spot for the advocacy group, ABEA, or African-Americans Beginning to Educate Americans about African-American Art. ABEA often finds venues for one-night exhibits, like a show in late March at the Wisconsin African American Women's Center.

At Paper Boat Boutique & Gallery, owned by Faythe Levine and Kim Kisiolek, it is the boutique part that keeps the gallery going.

The boutique, which sells unique, artist-made goods, is part of a growing national network of storefronts and Internet sites that sell whimsical and sometimes truly inspired craft items.

Paper Boat is doing so well that it's moving to a larger location at 2375 S. Howell Ave. on July 1, doubling its space and giving it a larger gallery.

"We have enough clout at this point to get some very good artists, so that is really great for us," says Levine, adding that they already have shows booked through 2007.

The artists Paper Boat plans to show tend to be art-school trained but with a penchant for non-traditional, down-to-earth, craft-as-art approaches.

Artist Mike Brodie's diary in Polaroid pictures of an underground, train-hopping culture will be the first show.

Hermetic Gallery was a loss

Galleries besides KM art that have pulled up stakes here in recent months include General Store in Riverwest, which showed some important artists and also sold artist-made goods; Luckystar in the Third Ward, which was hoping to reopen in Chicago; and StudiomaK in Walker's Point, which is on hiatus with the hopes of relocating.

Another loss was the Hermetic Gallery, owned by Nicholas Frank, which shared space with KM art when that gallery opened in 1998.

Frank, an artist, critic and freelance curator, however, continues the Hermetic name by organizing projects.

The alternative art scene, though, is resilient.

It seems that as one gallery hangs it up, another comes along.

A new gallery, Barrow & Juarez, will open at 207 E. Buffalo St. in the Third Ward in July with plans to show local, national and international artists.

Without even being open, Brooks Barrow and Frank Juarez are finalizing reciprocal agreements with galleries in London and firming up plans to participate in next year's Documenta, a major art fair in Germany.

"Frank and I both are very serious about furthering the visual arts here in Milwaukee," Barrow wrote in an e-mail interview. "It's also our intent to bring cutting-edge contemporary work to a broader audience."

Some of the artists the gallery has lined up are notable, including Jan Estep, former editor of the New Art Examiner, Stephen Laphisophon, Primitivo Suarez, Marisa Futernick and nearly a dozen others.

A more manageable art fair

Perhaps the most encouraging new project, though, is the Milwaukee International art fair, which will take place in a large Riverwest bar in October.

It is the brain child of Frank, who is organizing it along with Riepenhoff, Kiki Anderson and General Store's Tyson Reeder.

The art-world rage of the moment, art fairs tend to be huge, unruly affairs that cater to collectors with an eye to buy.

Even the so-called alternative art fairs such as Scope or DIVA in New York or Chicago's now defunct Stray Show, are too big to take in, and they are normally scheduled around the larger, more mainstream fairs.

"It's just this quirky thing off on its own," Kiki says of Milwaukee International. "It's going to be a lot smaller and also people are going to hang out. Because there is a bar next door . . . people can stay longer and look at things longer."

Some art-world heavyweights have agreed to participate, including Gavin Brown's Enterprise from New York, Angstrom Gallery from Dallas, Jack Hanley from San Francisco, Locust Projects from Miami, Western Exhibitions from Chicago, Galeria Commercial from Puerto Rico and Polvo from Chicago.

Even Mueller, who opened the Wright Street Gallery in 1984 and then the Metropolitan Gallery in 1987, and who ran Walker's Point Center for the Arts in 1995 and '96, plans open another gallery, even if it takes a few years to do it.

He even has a name: Skip Tracer Fine Arts.

KM art's final day is Friday. Mueller will be open from 3 to 8 p.m. and hoping to sell a little art.

After that, his Web site will keep up a minimal presence, with updates about what might be in the works. A photo by KM art regular Francis Ford, posted on the site (my.execpc.com/~artkm/), shows Mueller with a cardboard sign tied around his neck: "Will curate art for food."

"KM's closing hopefully provides someone else with motivation to open a space, just as the closing of the Metropolitan in 1992 did for me," writes Frank in an e-mail interview referring to his decision to open Hermetic.

"If every time Kent closes a gallery another one opens, I guess that's ultimately a good thing. As long as he keeps re-opening."

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