

## ENTERTAINMENT BLOGS

# Making a Scene: Milwaukee's Avant-Garde

By *Mary Louise Schumacher* of the *Journal Sentinel*

Dec. 12, 2011

A decade ago, Milwaukee's art scene seemed to be having a moment.

Even the most cynical and pragmatic among us fell under the spell of hopefulness, the notion that Milwaukee, this flyover locale that was nowhere on the art-world map, was becoming an important, artistic frontier, to use artist **David Robbins'** term.

Connective tissue began to form between disparate pockets of the art community. Underground, do-it-yourself art projects, galleries, art schools, academics, major institutions and culture makers of all kinds took note of one another and surfaced as one remarkable, indigenous scene.

The catalyst, of course, was the unfurling of **Santiago Calatrava's** avant-garde structure on the lakefront, perhaps the single most important artistic gesture in the city's history. But the period of raucous invention that ensued had little to do with the [Milwaukee Art Museum's](#) new wing.

Milwaukee was becoming a gathering place for artists with a unique and decidedly generous artistic ethic. Cheerfully unorganized, maverick artists found inspiration and an audience first in each other. A playful amateurism prevailed, as artists embraced their obscurity,



understanding both the freedoms and limitations that are part of being set apart from the larger art world.

Chicago artist **Kirsten Stoltmann** said something at that time that would later

inspire the title of my column and blog — Art City.

“Milwaukee is one of the most creative art cities now,” she told me. “There is a new kind of ambition here. It’s a different, more honest art...a different ethic.”

That period was captured in a large, group portrait featuring some of the personalities that defined the scene at the time (image, below). I took another look at that Journal Sentinel picture and [article](#) recently. As I looked at the faces — some still with us, others long gone — I realized that it was time to consider to what extent that sense of promise has been realized.



As I considered what has — and has not — taken root, I conducted dozens of interviews and studio visits and collected surveys from about 65 people. What I can tell you is that almost no one, myself included, found the question easy to answer.

If we're honest, we know that the sense of promise of the early 2000s dissipated over time, almost imperceptibly, like a slow leaking tire. And yet, one of the things that defines the art scene today is its connection to that lived history, a trait that larger and more transient art scenes don't enjoy in the same way.

Some strain of art scene was birthed here a decade ago, and some of the best, new artists in our community are conscious of this and connected to the artists and ideas that defined that time. Our art scene may be small, but one of the things that makes it muscular is the access and proximity between the old and new guards.

I consider it a positive sign that there is less talk of a “moment” and more art of note being made today.

Given this changing picture, it seemed time for a whole new portrait.

So, recently, we gathered some of the artists, curators and thinkers that represent the fulfillment -- or potential fulfillment -- of what was hoped for 10 years ago. More than that, they represent a portrait of our avant-garde.



Why the avant-garde? It's a funny term, of course. Ironically, it is antiquated, quaint even.

For a long while, it meant little more than “new” and belonged to an era when art historical beginnings and endings seemed to bump into each other like train cars running down some kind of a linear track. But in an era when art can be — and is — just about anything, a time the art world sometimes calls a "post historical condition," what does it

mean to be avant-garde?

I don't have a precise definition for you, just a loose list of attributes that I often refine and edit in my mind. It has something to do with qualities related to research and asking good questions. Instead of breakthroughs in cancer research or quantum physics, avant-garde artists explore and reveal something of the human condition. It has to do with intellectual rigor and inventive uses of materials, among other things. And it has something to do with keeping it real, too, with not separating the real world from the art world.

Put most simply, though, it is an important term, worth holding onto, that recognizes that some artists are ahead of others.

The group I selected is not definitive. But these people are certainly ahead of most, are creating an exceptional quality of work and define the current scene. Some were selected because of the strength of their work, others for the strength of their ideas and their influence. And a few are here because of their promise alone.

Before we look at this avant-garde, though, let's roll the clock back briefly for a glimpse at the essential back story.

In 2001, I described **Paul Druecke's** christening of a forlorn patch of concrete, a tidbit of urban space that he dubbed Blue Dress Park, in the lead for that article I wrote a decade ago. The project was then -- and remains -- a symbol of that time. Not unlike the way artists approached Milwaukee itself, Druecke took a spot that didn't look like much and radically altered it with an open-air art happening.



**Nicholas Frank**, too, was an essential figure. He was a principal advocate for creating a vibrant dialogue around contemporary art and helped create an audience for challenging work. He had -- and has -- a great eye and became a trusted curatorial voice. Though he showed difficult art at his Hermetic Gallery, his space was routinely jammed for art openings and discussions. He also had his hand in a multitude of thoughtful and often participatory projects, such as The Nicholas Frank Public Library.

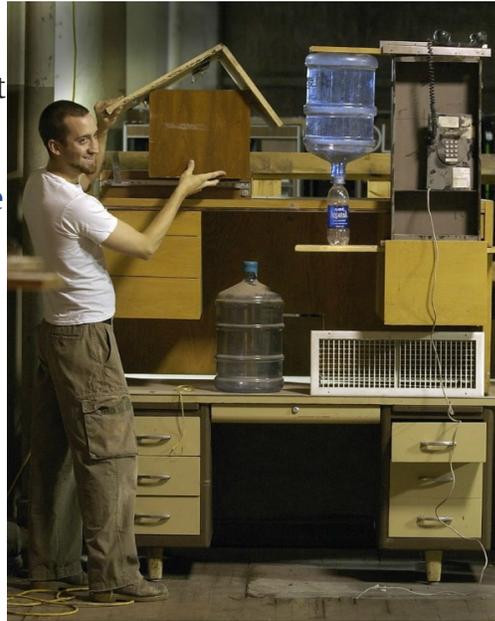
Robbins was a critical, quiet influence, as well. A conceptual artist with a long history of exhibiting work around the world, Robbins sensed possibility here and made Milwaukee his home. He was a critical link to the wider art universe and the dialogues happening there. In the now defunct *New Art Examiner*, a magazine that for a while was dedicated to the coverage of art in the Midwest, he wrote about why Milwaukee and other Corn- and Rust Belt cities were experiencing cultural renaissances.



The graduate film program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee was turning out more visually sophisticated and conceptually rigorous artists than the art schools were, it seemed. And UWM was home to what was, to my mind, the most important institution of that period, Inova. While the wider art world was still coming to grips with a more pluralistic reality, Inova curators **Marilu Knode** and **Peter Doroshenko** (left) were among the first to truly grasp the implications of globalism on art and create a program that responded to it. They staged some of the most important exhibits of international artists in the nation right here. Though the importance

of Inova was not always recognized locally, the impact that this whole new range of art-making practices had on some local artists cannot be underestimated.

Elsewhere, the [Milwaukee Artists Resource Network](#), still an important support organization for artists, was being formed; a group of [Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design](#) students and graduates formulated collaborative forms of site-specific curating, staging Rust Spot shows in an abandoned produce building (Image right); **Theresa Columbus** created a space for performance art called Darling Hall; collectives such as Milhouse created anonymous and even secret art; Riverwest Film & Video, a video shop known as Pumpkin World, became famous for its Sunday night spaghetti dinners, hosted by brothers **Xav** and **Didier Leplae**, a salon for the creative set.



In Riverwest, the General Store, Bamboo Theater, Flying Fish Gallery, Jody Monroe Gallery and Hotcakes Gallery opened within walking distance of one another. The art was hit-or-miss but exceptional frequently enough.

Everyone wore multiple art-world hats, performance artists were filmmakers, writers were painters, curators were band mates. (Raise your hand if you remember the Singing Flowers and Horn Band bands!).

Beneath the chummy and seemingly casual veneer of much that existed then, there was a seriousness, too.

One of the most daring projects was **Jennifer Montgomery's** 2003 film "Threads of Belonging," which depicted the daily life of an

alternative treatment facility for people with mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. The ideas were based on the writings of a famous anti-psychiatry proponent R.D. Laing, but the characters and unscripted scenes became defined by the community of artists and filmmakers who produced and acted the work. The artistic trust and resiliency among the participating artists was breathtaking. Some of the artists and filmmakers who worked on the project include Druecke, Frank, **Stephanie Barber**, Didier Leplae, **Peter Barrickman**, **Carl Bogner**, **Dave O'Meara**, **Kelly Mink**, **Renato Umali**, **Lori Connerley** and **Jennifer Geigel**. (See video below, which includes nudity).

I'll never forget, too, encountering the magical paintings of **Laura Owens** casually hung in the tiny back gallery at General Store. Owens' was on her way to becoming a world-class name in the art world, with a solo show of large-scale paintings opening at MAM.

At that particular General Store opening I met two artists for the first time: **Andrew Swant** and **Bobby Ciraldo** (right). They told me about their new project, an art-film called "Hamlet A.D.D." I couldn't possibly do justice to their description these years later except to say that listening felt like a strange, out-of-body experience. It sounded incongruous, ambitious, impossible -- and



utterly captivating (more on this in a bit). It was the kind of encounter that became emblematic of that time for me.

The number of artists with considerable success that opted to make Milwaukee home at the time was a visible indicator to the local tribe that something was afoot here, too. Fresh from their success at Sundance with “American Movie,” filmmakers **Chris Smith** and **Sarah Price** set up shop, forming Bluemark Productions, a commercial venture that spun out several artistic endeavors such as Zero TV. Artists such as Robbins, Barber, **Santiago Cucullu** and **Scott Reeder**, each well known in the art world, found the terrain fertile and opted to remain too.

“There was a moment where I think all of the hard work that all of us were doing really was coming to fruition,” said Frank. “This absurd notion that Milwaukee could have an interesting and vibrant art scene actually happened.”



Perhaps one of the most visible indicators that things had taken a turn was the mounting loss of powerful, female voices. Barber, Columbus, Price, Montgomery and Knode all decamped to pursue new opportunities, as did artist and Rust Spot leader **Sara Daleiden** and artist **Naomi Montgomery**. Sisters **Kiki** and **Mali Anderson** (right) shut down their Jody Monroe Gallery.

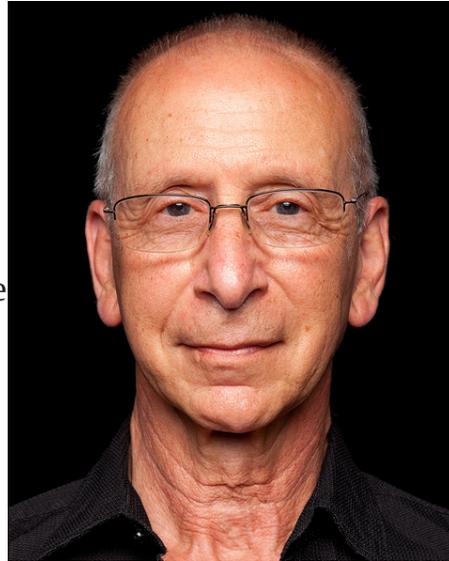
Some artists, reaching and pushing their 40s, some with families, started to peel away, citing among other things a lack of teaching opportunities, one of the primary ways for artists to make a living.

But many artists remained, and a few, as we shall see, have maintained an influence despite their distance. It is telling to see who was included

in the portraits from both then and now. Not surprisingly, the artists who were already dug in and focused on making their own work are among those that have continued to make it work in Milwaukee. It's an indicator of a simple truth -- persistence in the studio pays off.

Many of them are mature artists who are making more work than ever and exhibiting locally more than they once did.

**Dick Blau** (right), who helped shape the influential film program at UWM and who is a leader within the photography community, remains a consistent influence among younger artists. Whenever there is a screening of local films, Blau is thanked as much as anyone I know.



Frank continues to be a critical voice. For a while, he did the impossible and filled the shoes of the team that ran Inova in its heyday. His mission was different, as was the time, but it was a solid attempt at international programming and a knowing homage to the important institution.

**Tom Bamberger**, an award winning critic, nationally known artist and the former photography curator at MAM, is known locally primarily for a legacy of contemporary exhibitions including the first U.S. show for Andreas Gursky, whose large-scale landscape photographs are among the priciest photographs in the world today. Bamberger has a New York gallery and rarely shows work here, but the immersive, sensuous video installations he has shown very recently are among the most exciting works I've seen here in recent years.

**Jill Sebastian** (left), Xav Leplae and Robbins are pictured again, too, each holding a positive influence, producing more art individually than



ever – and visibly showing more work here than they once did.

Fast forward to today. Once again, Druecke's Blue Dress Park is an apt symbol. Druecke gave up on Milwaukee for a while but was drawn back to the possibilities here a few years ago. His Blue Dress Park was recently revitalized, resurrected with with

additional art happenings. This time, his once obscure “park” even found its way onto an official city tour or significant sites.

So, what has changed? What's different today?

Context is part of it. The relationship that Milwaukee itself has to art is an issue. Few have illusions any longer that the heightened profile of the Milwaukee Art Museum will translate into a larger, more art-literate audiences for local galleries and artists. There was a lot of discussion 10 years ago about the investment in MAM being something that would “lift all boats.”

For 10 years we've seen travel stories appear in publications around the world, celebrating MAM and predictably declaring Milwaukee no longer a beer-and-brats city. We are an art city, they say. Milwaukeeans have embraced this *idea* – but not the art. It is too bad that local audiences haven't more fully embraced the art outside of MAM.

In truth, the case for art is as hard to make as it's ever been in my time here. This has played out in various public art-related debates over the years. There's no evidence that the base of collectors and general support for local artists and galleries has changed much.

The [Mary L. Nohl Fellowships](#), which awards \$65,000 to seven individual artists each year, is critical support for artists. The jurying

process gives local artists an audience with curators outside the region. Many artists mentioned in this article and featured in the portrait have won a Nohl fellowship. Still, unto itself it is limited.

It seems especially important, in fact, to showcase those who are serious about art at a time when the political climate is increasingly hostile to the arts and funding is being slashed. Even civic leaders keen on supporting the arts, who work to promote the “creative industries” as an economic driver, often seem more interested in art marketing than art making and remarkably disconnected from the people I've highlighted here.

This has, of course, been hugely disappointing to some artists and gallery owners, and not much of a surprise to others. But most accept the limited degree of interest as part of the dynamic, as a constraint that has to be worked around. Some have even made this particular challenge part of their art-making practice and business plans.

A good example of this kind of pragmatic entrepreneurialism is [American Fantasy Classics](#), a four-person collective made up of **Alec Reagan**, **Brittany Ellenz**, **Oliver Sweet** and **Liza Pflughoft** (right). The group are skilled fabricators, which is essentially how they make a living. But they have turned the role of artist assistant and fabricator on its ear, too, blurring the lines of authorship in interesting ways. They approach established artists with proposals for how to give their conceptual aims new forms, working with two-dimensional artists on sculptures, for instance.



Recently, they worked with another four-person collective, the conceptual performance group [The White Box Painters](#), which was part

of the first boom and includes **Brent Budsberg**, **Shana McCaw**, **Harvey Opgenorth** and **Mark Escribano**. The latter two members of the White Box Painters are active artists in Los Angeles today.

The four AFC artists effectively took over the WBP roles and staged performances and installations. They painted a massive white box onto a parking lot, for instance, an alternative to the traditional gallery space, the pristine "white box." For a time, when you went to the American Fantasy Classics space in Riverwest the door opened to what seemed a shallow storage closet with WBP coveralls and WBP gear tucked neatly inside. It was a poignant homage to a group that has had to hang it up much of the time because of their physical separation.

That project could also be considered a form of criticism, of the younger group pointing to an important passage of regional art history as important and worthy of continuation. These AFC projects widen the nascent group's exposure and network of art-world contacts, incidentally, which has the practical effect of leading to more work, as well.

This kind of entrepreneurialism is also a defining quality for **Plaid Tuba**, the brainchild of artists **Reginald Baylor** and **Heidi Witz**. Plaid Tuba makes an end run around Milwaukee's limited gallery system by creating partnerships between artists and commercial interests. Plaid Tuba has been given essential support by developer **Barry Mandel** and his Mandel Group, an exception to the rule regarding support for art. Plaid Tuba has effectively created a residency program and provides local businesses with ready access to artists for various projects. Currently, the Plaid Tuba artists include **Amanda Gerken**, **Melissa Dorn Richards**, **Pamela Anderson** and Baylor.

Robbins, who spent about a year in Andy Warhol's Factory as a young artist, who initially made a name for himself in the 1980s with conceptual works about the art machine, has for many years been interested in finding highly entertaining, accessible ways of connecting



with an otherwise disinterested mainstream audience. In recent years, he's worked with Swant and Ciraldo to slip art into the living rooms of Milwaukee's bleary-eyed, middle-of-the-night, reach-for-the-remote

set. The trio created an experimental TV show called "Something Theater" that has aired in late-night slots between infomercials and "Scrubs" reruns. Robbins also creates TV ads for local art exhibits, such as the [Warhol show](#) at the Milwaukee Art Museum, too.

"Something Theater" is also one of the few places to catch snippets of Swant and Ciraldo's previously mentioned and *still-in-progress* "Hamlet A.D.D." Some, myself included, wonder if this tale of an easily distracted Hamlet, shot entirely in green screen and with a B-movie aesthetic, will ever reach completion or is intended to. But the build up alone explores issues of Internet-based fame, it tackles the subject of entertainment while being, by the way, wildly entertaining. It also features a who's who of Milwaukee's film and art communities.

Other organizations that creatively tackle issues related to audience include In:Site and the Parachute Project.

[In:Site](#), an organization founded by **Pegi Christiansen** and **Amy Mangrich** that advocates for temporary public art, is certainly one of the more avant-garde efforts.



While the group's installations are still experimental and imperfect, it has made our urban geography itself a platform for critical dialogue and put art in front of a wider, more general audience. It experiments with unique

forms of community participation that are promising. It has injected locality back into public art here, a community where public art tends to be conventional and general. In:Site has changed the conversation about public art more than any other entity, artist or organization.

Similarly, the newer Parachute Project, formed by **Ella Dwyer**, **Makael Flammini** and **Jes Myszka**, draws attention to forlorn areas and architecture with conceptually focused art installations. Their [most recent project](#), at the Grand Avenue Mall, was a collaboration between German artist **Kati Heck** and Milwaukee artist **Colin Matthes**.



**Debra Brehmer**, a longstanding figure and critic, represents this entrepreneurial spirit in the gallery scene. For her [Portrait Society Gallery](#), she has developed an exhibition structure that draws in both meaningful participation and funding or commissions that make the shows financially feasible. The [Real Photo Postcard Survey Project](#) (left), featuring the works of **Julie Lindemann** and **John Shimon**, was a good example of this. It would be so easy for this sort of approach to take its toll on the quality of exhibitions,

but Brehmer continues to run one of the strongest galleries in town. She is, in fact, opening a greatly expanded space in the Third Ward's Marshall Building in March.

Some will be surprised and critical, to be sure, to see former gallery owner **Mike Brenner** on my list. But he too represents this do-it-yourself spirit. As an arts agitator famous for shuttering his gallery in protest of the Bronze Fonz and [shaving his head in solidarity](#) with then detained Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, he has consistently challenged Milwaukee with one very good question: What would happen if the community supported the *best* art made here? He has spent tens of

thousands of dollars and the last several years of his life getting his MBA and a brewmaster's license in order to offer an answer of his own. Art will be integrated into the business he hopes to start.

Another issue that's considered a constant in Milwaukee's art scene is a lack of diversity. Ten years ago, the portrait we took was of a group of white people, and while the current group features a few people of color, Milwaukee's art scene remains challenged when it comes to issues of race.

**Della Wells** (right), an African American artist who has experienced significant success outside of Milwaukee, said there are very few, young emerging artists of color attracted to Milwaukee. The Peltz Gallery, run by **Cissie Peltz**, is perhaps the only gallery that routinely exhibits local artists of color. But, Wells points out, an increasing number of black and minority artists are building audiences and a base of collectors in other cities by leveraging technology and the Internet.



“As an African American artist, the real story is how some artist have become much more savvy,” Wells said.

Wells, one of the nation's foremost contemporary folk artist, has herself had several important local exhibits in recent years, including a major survey at the Charles Allis Art Museum. Her colorful collages, drawings, dolls, assemblages and quilts – forms of deeply personal storytelling – were recently [the inspiration for a theater production](#) with First Stage Children's Theater that dealt with issues of race and mental illness.

The fact that Milwaukee's art scene remains challenged by issues

related to diversity surfaced last year in a particular way as a result of a collaboration between the [Chipstone Foundation](#), one of the most progressive arts institutions in Milwaukee, and artist **Theaster Gates**, an urban planner, performance artist and fierce advocate of black identity. To its great credit, Chipstone gave Gates a platform and total freedom to create art that was effectively a critique of MAM and the city on issues of race. The initial inability to recruit singers from local, African American churches for the project made it clear that there is some longer-term relationship building to do. (See resulting performances, which also included choir members from Chicago-area churches, below).

### Theaster Gates Performance



**David Gordon**, the former director of the Milwaukee Art Museum, said in an interview that one of his great regrets was not addressing issues of race and poverty more directly during his tenure. In addition to drawing diverse audience *to* the museum, he said, the museum should find ways to be physically present *in* underserved neighborhoods.

How else does the current period of inventiveness differ from the last one? The kind of lithe and nimble experimentation we saw then exists now, too. One of the greatest contributions that the first group offered

to the current one may be a framework and a sense of permission to create their own community-driven projects.

On the whole, though, the art scene, once very performative and ebullient, seems closer to the ground, less personality driven and increasingly socially conscious.

This groundedness exists even among a spate of independent spaces opened by younger artists. While these kinds of venues come and go perennially, a critical number of them that have opened in the last year or two. Some believe this marks a renewal.

Spaces such as American Fantasy Classics, [Small Space](#), [Nabr](#), Jackpot Gallery, Pink House and [Center](#), among others, represent a would-be avant-garde. An astonishing number of the artists associated with these venues point to the first art boom as a direct influence.

“There was this group of people who had this incredible relationship and ideas that just fit together,” said **Sarah Luther**, an emerging artist who opened an experimental art-community center of her own earlier this year. Luther has a studio in a Riverwest building that once was and is again crammed with artists and galleries.

“There is a younger group that idolizes that...It’s what drew me back to Milwaukee,” said Luther, who went to art school in Kansas City.



Much of this micro scene can also be traced to a corresponding and recent revival at MIAD, where some of these younger artists have studied and where some of the established artists critical to the discussion about art here in the last several have been hired to teach in recent years. The established clutch includes, among others, Frank,

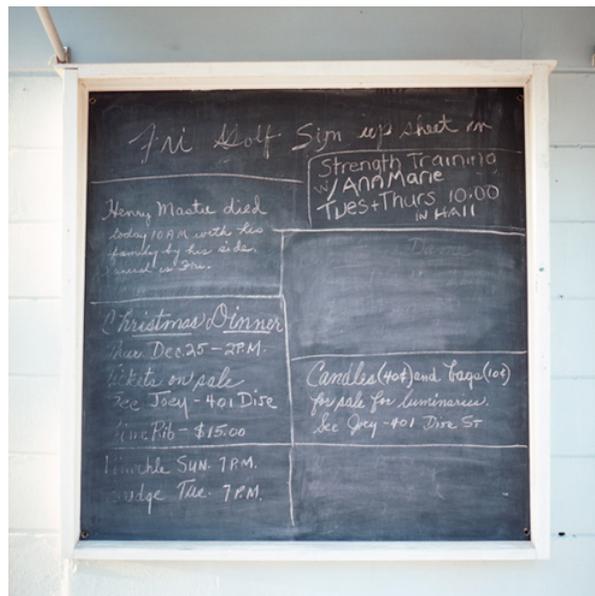
Barrickman, Budsberg, McCaw and Cucullu (left), as well as **Kevin Miyazaki**.

"They seem like they are up and running even while they are undergrads: running small spaces in Riverwest; showing their work; attending openings and events...really being a present and vital force," wrote Portrait Society Gallery owner Brehmer in her survey response, referring to the influence of students from both MIAD and UWM. "This definitely energizes the entire scene."

It can be an insular scene, to be sure. Exhibits tend to be one-night affairs that come together last minute. Invitations are usually sent via Facebook or made word of mouth. It's unfortunate that some of these spaces don't lay the groundwork for engaging a wider audience, testing their curatorial chops against audiences with more than a few degrees of separation, since many of them, influenced by the ideas of mentors such as Robbins and Frank, have a mind to present challenging but accessible art. At the same time, this scene within a scene is large enough to support a critical dialogue unto itself, too.

It's a pretty big group, in truth. Had we invited all of them to be part of the portrait, we would have doubled the size of the crowd. So we made due with a representative few, Reagan and Ellenz.

A strata of the local photography community is also worth noting as a grounded and visually astute clique. A tight-knit but permeable group of photographers manage to engage in rich but informal dialogues about art on a regular basis. I sometimes wonder if this group has taken the place that the UWM film community once held in terms of



generating artists of conceptual rigor. Some of these artists include Miyazaki, **Jessica K. Kaminski**, **Sonja Thomsen**, **Jon Horvath** and **Mark Brautigam**, among others. The influence that MAM's photography curator **Lisa Hostetler** holds by exhibiting some of the strongest contemporary art at MAM cannot be underestimated. She has created a platform for a sustained dialogue.

It warrants noting here, too, that **Russell Bowman**, the director of the Milwaukee Art Museum was included in the portrait 10 years ago. **Dan Keegan** and **Brady Roberts**, the director and chief curator at MAM today, were not invited to be included in the current one. This is in large part because of the increasing nonchalance of MAM toward the local art community.

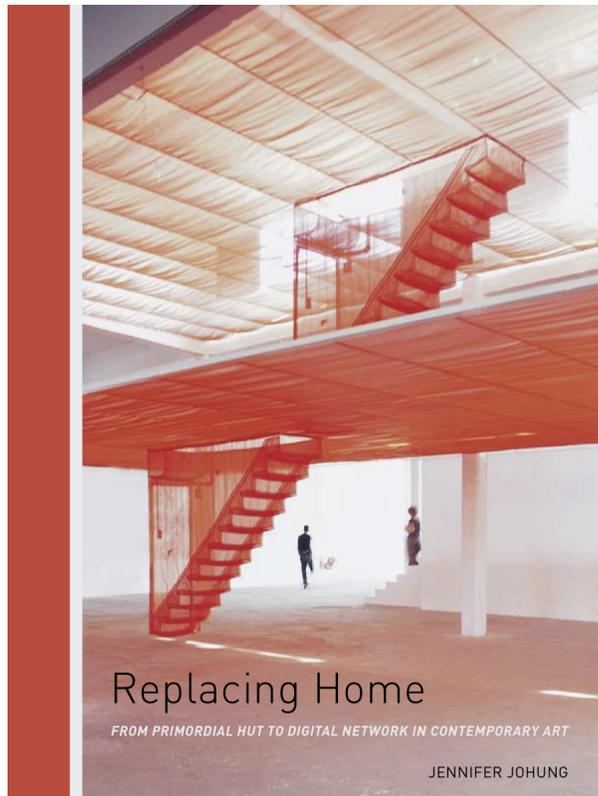
Another major change that we see today are the number of connections that exist between the wider art world and Milwaukee artists and galleries.

Filmmaker and artist **Faythe Levine** has for years brought an international spectrum of cutting-edge craft to Milwaukee through her spaces and projects, including the gallery she runs today [Sky High Gallery](#). She travels around the world to screen her film "Handmade Nation" and to talk about the global rise of the do-it-yourself crafting movement in recent years.

The newly energized [Lynden Sculpture Garden](#) has not only infused contemporary art into the sculpture garden of Milwaukee's most important collector, the late **Peg Bradley**, it has also forged connections elsewhere and already begun exhibiting national and international artists. **Polly Morris**, executive director, is guiding the program there.

[Fine Line](#), a curated, international art magazine devoid of advertising and reviews, founded by **Jessica Steeber** and **Cassandra Smith**, creates a new model for exporting emerging artists.

Daleiden, who lives in LA but returns to Milwaukee frequently, has been working in recent years to import Milwaukee ideas to Los Angeles. Last year, she [organized “MKE-LAX”](#) to bring Rust Spot’s site-specific curatorial ideas west. That show was on view at Woodbury Hollywood Exhibitions.



Next month, another exhibit featuring Milwaukee artists will open in Los Angeles. Organized around the ideas of UWM contemporary art historian **Jennifer Johung** and her upcoming book “Replacing Home” (left, from University of Minnesota Press, Dec. 2011) [the exhibit at JAUS](#) will featured the works of **Yevgeniya Kaganovich, Nathaniel Stern** and Kaminiski.

While there seems to be some consensus that MIAD is infusing the local scene with more energy than UWM’s art program, which always seems laden with bureaucratic messiness, the Peck School of the Arts has plenty of bright spots, and Johung, Stern and Kaganovich are among the brightest.

Stern, who is an occasional contributor to this blog, combines new and traditional media in a way that creates unexpected experiences. He, for instance, sometimes straps a desktop scanner, laptop and battery pack to his body and performs, creating dynamic, impressionistic images that are part multimedia, part theater. He is also one of the most knowledgeable experts on interactive art you’ll find anywhere.

As for Johung, the mere existence of an accomplished contemporary art historian is reason enough to celebrate, as many art history programs

don't value the contemporary as a discipline. It's not really history yet, some argue, to oversimplify a bit. Johung's research explores how people locate themselves in the world today and our changing notions of home. She has become a performer of her ideas and has engaged with artists in a way that is unusual for a historian.

It is telling that there is no home for these latter two LA exhibitions here in Milwaukee. One of the great shortcomings of Milwaukee's art scene today is that it lacks a major contemporary art institution. It doesn't help that the Milwaukee Art Museum has turned its back on more than a century of an emphasis on the art of the contemporary moment (as I explored [in a recent article](#)), and nothing has ever quite replaced Inova, the fate of which is up in the air. Other institutions are conscious of this and attempting to fill the gap. The [Haggerty Museum of Art](#) at Marquette, under the guidance of director **Wally Mason**, has upped its game in terms of contemporary art considerably, as have the Villa Terrace Decorative Arts and Charles Allis [art museums](#) under the curatorial leadership of **Martha Monroe**. Despite their subpar physical space, MIAD too has improved its contemporary exhibition program of late. The "Generation Next" exhibit recently curated by **Jason Yi** being perhaps the best example.

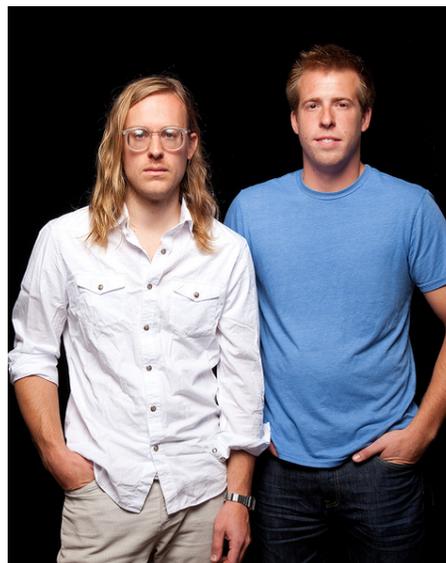
We have some fantastic galleries here, of course. The Tory Folliard Gallery, known especially for showing accomplished painters, has increasingly been gravitating toward conceptual artists, featuring **James Franklin** and Barrickman recently. **Beth Lipman**, one of the best conceptual craft artists in the nation, currently has work on view there as well. The Dean Jensen Gallery is the leading gallery for idea-driven work, but we could use about four or five additional spaces of that caliber (**Dean Jensen** was invited to be part of the avant-garde portrait, incidentally).

Madison is increasingly becoming an art center, of course. The Madison Museum of Contemporary Art and the Chazen Museum have both expanded into new structures with exquisite new galleries for

contemporary work. MMoCA's triennial has become an important showcase for Wisconsin artists, a show where we encounter artists we may not see otherwise.

Still, Milwaukee has more artists actively exhibiting nationally and internationally than ever before, many of whom are unable to find a suitable venues to exhibit their work locally. The loss of the **Michael Lord** Gallery about a decade ago, which shuttered amid claims of financial mismanagement and lawsuits, meant that artists such as Bamberger and **Steven D. Foster** had fewer options for routine exhibitions in their own town. It is interesting to consider that the only reason we've seen Bamberger's work of late is because of a unique collaboration forged with **Deb Loewen** and the Wild Space Dance Company.

Oddly enough, what comes closest to replacing the spirit of Inova may be the [Green Gallery](#). It is hard to believe that **John Riepenhoff** and **Jake Palmert** opened their Green Gallery East only three years ago, as its become such an essential space.



Riepenhoff and Palmert don't flip the art-looking switch on only when in a gallery or museum. They see art anywhere, anytime and in the most populist of platforms. From the start, they have found ways to create meaningful and unorthodox experiences out of those discoveries, exhibits that also question the canon of contemporary art enthusiastically.

In a grubby building crammed with artist's studios in Riverwest, they run the Green Gallery West. It is a project space, of sorts, for less-known artists, informal art experiments and film screenings, among other things.

The main gallery on the East Side presents conceptual artists, many of whom operate outside the commercial art world. At first glance, the space is more formal, more old-school, with white walls and a high-profile location. But it is also a petite, Atomic Age drive-through, a welcoming building with giant plate glass windows that makes the art visible from the street.

“I want to bring artists from around the world to Milwaukee, and vice versa,” Riepenhoff told me three years ago. “But I want to do it at street level with a take-away feel.”

Fittingly, David Robbins, who hadn't shown work locally very much, was the first artist exhibited by the Green Gallery East. Local and regional artists such as Barrickman, Cucullu, Druecke, Frank, Scott Reeder and **Michelle Grabner**, as well as a multitude of international artists, have also shown work.

Last winter, New York-based artist **Jose Lerma** curated “A Person of Color: A Mostly Orange Exhibition” at the Green Gallery. It was a show of all orange sculptures and paintings, most hung below waist level, where we had to look down at them or crouch to see them properly. The floor itself was painted with a crisscrossing orange pattern, leaving us to walk on the art from the moment we walked into the show.

At that time, the **Tory Folliard** Gallery, perhaps the most established gallery for contemporary painting in the city, also had a warm color-themed exhibit on view. Hey, it was January. A month when Milwaukeeans could use a fiery blast. At the Folliard Gallery, the show was equally random, a conceit employed to bring together some of the gallery's better artists. The show was filled with beautifully executed works and was a nice cross section of the artists the gallery works with. A perfectly fine show.

What Lerma did at the Green Gallery, though, was challenge these kinds of curatorial approaches. In many ways it was a show about who

rules – the artist or curator. Who was the artist here, those who made the individual works or the artists who pulled them together in this bizarre installation?

The Tory Folliard show was about the display and sale of art, while the Green Gallery show was about challenging ideas.

Last summer, I visited the Green Gallery's pop-up gallery at Canal 47 in New York's Chinatown. They took over the gallery during August, when many in the art world flee the city. They were presenting an exhibit of a little known artist curated by Xav Leplae, who was blindfolded when he hung the show. Leplae also, incidentally, hopped freight trains to get to New York, trying to keep his carbon footprint as close to zero as possible. The low-key generosity of the project, the way that artists and gallery owners relinquished their authorial voices to one another (and to random chance) was interesting to me.

It was, in fact, very in keeping with what has proved to be a longstanding collaborative and experimental ethic in Milwaukee. Considerably more common in the art world today, I'd trace this approach back to a term coined by Robbins in the '90s: Platformist.

"There has never been a better time to be an artist in Milwaukee than now," said Riepenhoff, who is an important crossover figure, someone who got a start during the first boom, who started the first Green Gallery in his Riverwest attic, and who epitomizes the current boom. "We have more critically active venues than I've seen before."

The Green Gallery is probably the most nationally and internationally active gallery in Milwaukee today and the venue most often mentioned as critical to the local avant-garde in the surveys I received. But, again, it'd be nice to have a few more Green Galleries to spare. Like any venue, it is limited, too. It has a particular focus and exhibits within a certain strata of the art world, and its space is small and not suited to certain types of multimedia work, for instance.

One of the dangers of having a vibrant but small scene is that it can become dependent upon certain people and places. If the Green Gallery were to close, it would be like putting a pin in things.



Riepenhoff, along with Frank, Scott Reeder, **Tyson Reeder** and **Elysia Borowy-Reeder**, also organized the Milwaukee International, a homey

alternative to the larger art world's overly commercial art fairs, with polka and bowling to boot. The fairs, the first in 2006, the second in 2008, brought galleries from across the country and around the globe to the basement of the Falcon Bowl in Riverwest, an event that attracted international press.

“Milwaukee” and “international” sounded funny together at first, the organizers told me at the time – until they decided to take it seriously.

When I attended one of those swanky fairs at about this time last year, Art Basel Miami, and introduced myself as I do as a critic from Milwaukee. The reaction from galleries from around the world was revealing. Maybe one in 20, registered a look of recognition. Ah yes, they'd say, and utter a few proper nouns. Calatrava was one of them, sure. But “Green Gallery,” “Inova” and “Milwaukee International” tripped off the tongues of art-world figures often enough, too.

This seems evidence, to me, that there is a small, dedicated and fragile avant-garde here. Milwaukee has been recognized as a place where something special has been happening.

A few questions remain now. What would it take to better sustain -- and grow -- Milwaukee's avant-garde? What can the community do during the next decade to retain Milwaukee's most interesting artists and to keep this fragile and unique ecosystem thriving? And what person or institution might step forward to be sure a dialogue is had?

***Special note about the Photographers:*** While being interviewed for this story, local artist and photographer Kevin J. Miyazaki offered to shoot the portrait of Milwaukee's avant-garde. He ended up creating the large, group photograph, individual portraits and a cover montage the print version. Had he not been behind the camera, Miyazaki, as well as photographer Jessica Kaminski, who assisted with the project, would have been in front of it, had it been up to me. Kevin is currently working on a series of portraits of Wisconsinites. He is a former winner of the Mary L. Nohl Fellowship and has created several bodies of work in recent years, particularly shooting the fate of buildings once used in Japanese internment camps. Kaminski is preparing to exhibit a dress made of from Jennifer Johung's book, printed on tissue and intended to be worn by Johung. For more information on these artists: [www.kevinmiyazaki.com](http://www.kevinmiyazaki.com) and [www.jessicakaminski.com](http://www.jessicakaminski.com).

***Special note about the 2011 portrait location:*** The location of the recent portrait, taken by Kevin J. Miyazaki, was the historic Pritzlaff Building. We owe a special thanks to **Ken Bruenig** of *Sunset Investors*, owners of the building, who not only allowed us to use the site but helped us find a spot in the historic complex for the photograph and helped us move large objects to make it happen. I would also like to thank **Diane Bacha** and **Lonnie Turner**, Art City contributors, for assisting with the project on the day of the shoot.

*Images from top:*

1. Nicholas Frank and Tyson Reeder, 2002, at the opening of the General Store. From Journal Sentinel archives.
2. Group portrait taken April 10, 2001 by Journal Sentinel photographer Jack Orton. **Chris Smith**, director of "American Movie."

(Second row, first person on the left); **Gabe Lanza**, organizer of Rust Spot art shows (First row, first person on the left); **Jeremy Wolf**, artist (Second row, second person from the left); **Peter Barrickman**, artist, musician and set designer (Third row, first person on the left); **Sonia Kubica**, MARN organizer (Left ladder, first person on the left); **Scott Reeder**, artist, currently works for Zero TV (Left ladder, top of the ladder); **Eric Archer**, artist, organizer of Factory Soiree (Front row, second person from the left); **Naomi Montgomery**, artist, organizer of Factory Soiree (Second row, third from left, wearing a black hat); **Paul Druecke**, artist, founder of Art Street Window (Third row, second from left); **Theresa Columbus**, artist, playwright, owner of Darling Hall (Third row, third person from left); **Sarah Price**, "American Movie" filmmaker, drummer in band Competitorr (Left ladder, first person on the right); **Stephanie Barber**, artist, filmmaker, musician, owner of Bamboo Theater (Front row, center); **Didier Leplae**, artist, owner Riverwest Video and Film, bassist for The Paragraphs (Second row, center); **David Robbins**, artist best known for work called "Talent" (Third row, fourth person from left); **Nicholas Frank**, artist, writer and owner of Hermetic Gallery (On stairs, first person on the left); **Tom Bamberger**, artist-photographer, writer and a MAM curator (Front row, third person from the right); Marilu Knode, arts writer, inova curator (Second row, fourth person from the right); **Bill Budelman**, collage artist, risingartist.com (On stairs, third person from the right); **Russell Bowman**, Milwaukee Art Museum director (On stairs, second person from the right); **Dick Blau**, head of UWM film department (Second row, third person from the right); **Peter Doroshenko**, inova director (Front row, second from right); **Jennifer Montgomery**, writer, artist and filmmaker, and **Mila the dog**. (Front row, first person on the right); **Xav Leplae**, owner Riverwest Video and Film (Second row, second from right); **Jill Sebastian**, sculptor and MIAD teacher (On stairs, first person on the right); **Doug Holst**, abstract painter and MAM night guard (Second row, first person on the right (seated on ladder)).

3. *Portrait of Milwaukee's Avant-Garde*, taken by artist-photographer **Kevin J. Miyazaki**, with help from **Jessica Kaminski**, 2011. From left to right: **Nicholas Frank**, artist, curator, early advocate of dialogue about art in Milwaukee and instructor at the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design; **Jennifer Johung**, contemporary art historian and writer at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; **Roy Staab**, internationally recognized ecological artist; **Dick Blau**, helped create the influential film program at UWM; **Della Wells**, nationally recognized collage artist; **Santiago Cucullu**, internationally exhibited artist and influential instructor at MIAD; **Wally Mason**, director of the Haggerty Museum of Art; **Heidi Witz**, a founder of the entrepreneurial minded Plaid Tuba; **Cassandra Smith**, artist and co-founder of Fine Line; **Andrew Swant**, nationally known artist and experimental filmmaker; **Reginald Baylor**, painter and founder of Plaid Tuba; **Brent Budsberg** and **Shana McCaw**, artists and founding member of the White Box Painters performance group; **Faythe Levine**, filmmaker and internationally known expert on cutting-edge craft; **Jill Sebastian**, sculptor, public artist and instructor at MIAD; **Jessica Steeber**, artist and co-founder of Fine Line; **Ashley Morgan**, installation artist; **Pegi Christiansen**, co-founder of In:Site and the Performance Art Showcase; **Mark Brautigam**, photographer; **Lisa Hostetler**, curator of photography at the Milwaukee Art Museum; **Nathaniel Stern**, internationally exhibited interactive artist; **Xav LePlae**, filmmaker and artist; **David Robbins**, internationally known writer and artist; **Mike Brenner**, artist-agitator; **Bobby Ciraldo**, nationally known artist and experimental filmmaker; **Polly Morris**, director of the Lynden Sculpture Garden, an important new site for contemporary programming; **Paul Druecke**, an artist who engages the public and strangers in his ongoing practice; **Claudia Mooney**, curator with Chipstone Foundation; **Greg Klassen**, painter; **Sonja Thomsen**, conceptual photographer; **Yevgenia Kaganovich**, an artist with a hybrid practice that includes jewelry making, sculpture and installation; **Tom Bamberger**, former museum curator, award-winning critic and nationally recognized artist; **Jason Yi**, artist, curator and increasingly

*influential figure at MIAD; **Deb Brehmer**, owner of the Portrait Society Gallery; **Alec Reagan** and **Brittany Ellenz**, of American Fantasy Classics; **John Riepenhoff** and **Jake Palmert**, owners of the internationally connected Green Gallery.*

*4. Portrait of Paul Druecke, by Kevin J. Miyazaki, 2011.*

*5. Inova's former senior curator Marilu Knode and director Peter Doroshenko play a fictitious game by Uri Tzaig, 1999, from Journal Sentinel archives.*

*6. Artist Harvey Opgenorth with 2002 Rust Spot installation, from Journal Sentinel archives.*

*7. Excerpt of Jennifer Montgomery's "Threads of Belonging."*

*8. Andrew Swant and Bobby Ciraldo, from Journal Sentinel archives.*

*9. Kiki and Mali Anderson, sisters and former owners of the Jody Monroe Gallery, from Journal Sentinel archives.*

*10. Portrait of Dick Blau, by Kevin J. Miyazaki, 2011.*

*11. Portrait of Jill Sebastian, by Kevin J. Miyazaki, 2011.*

*12. Portrait of American Fantasy Classics, courtesy the artists and the Bradley Family Foundation.*

*13. Still, from "Something Theater," courtesy David Robbins.*

*14. Portrait of Pegi Christiansen, by Kevin J. Miyazaki, 2011.*

*15. Image of Clair Chin and her two daughters, by Julie Lindemann and John Shimon, courtesy the artists and the Portrait Society Gallery.*

*16. Video of collaborative Theaster Gates performance at the Milwaukee Art Museum, 2010.*

*17. Portrait of Santiago Cucullu, by Kevin J. Miyazaki, 2011.*

18. *Part of the Re:Current series of photographic art by Sonja Thomsen.*

19. *Cover of "Replacing Home," due out from the University of Minnesota Press, Dec. 26, 2011.*

20. *Portrait of John Riepenhoff and Jake Palmert, owners of the Green Gallery, by Kevin J. Miyazaki, 2011.*

21. *John Riepenhoff, Nicholas Frank and Tyson Reeder, 2006, before the first "Milwaukee International."*



#### About Mary Louise Schumacher

Mary Louise Schumacher is the Journal Sentinel's art and architecture critic. She writes about culture, design, the urban landscape and Milwaukee's creative community. [Art City](#) is her award-winning cultural page and a community of more than 20 contributing writers and artists. Follow her on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

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