



story by blair schulman

Though August will mark the first anniversary of Dolphin Gallery's move from the Crossroads Arts District to the West Bottoms, the austere yet approachable gallery has been influencing and advancing the city's conversation on art since its founding more than 17 years ago.

Capturing the national spotlight, Kansas City plays a leading role in advancing the public's comprehension of and interest in contemporary art. Of the myriad reasons for the city's success, the most visible is the abundance of galleries that show and sell contemporary art by an astute mix of artists with regional, national and international reputations. While the current economic climate may give potential collectors pause, Kansas City's galleries are striving to underscore that—setting aside the cachet that can accompany a storied provenance—the educational and aesthetic value inherent to owning art is a worthwhile investment. That's why each exhibit space strives for a sophisticated mix that elevates the conversation while raising the collective consciousness.

In fact, the lifeblood of The Leedy-Voukos Art Center is education. That mission pulses through each of the Center's acquisitions and showings. Founded in 1985 by Jim Leedy, it bears pride of place as the first gallery in the Crossroads Arts District and profiles world-class art made both by individuals in Kansas City's own art community and by internationally renowned artists. As Director Holly Swangstu notes, a great deal of "passion and sweat equity" is needed to uphold this vision. When a piece of art is sold, the proceeds go right back into funding the Center's art classes, workshops and gallery spaces.

One recipient of this beneficence is the Opie Gallery, which is dedicated to promoting the work of emerging artists such as photo print artist/painter Tom Strykowicz. But Leedy-Voukos



also exhibits the work of internationally collected artists like painter Shirley Luke Schnell, further reflecting its importance both in Kansas City and the art world at large.

Some of the influence wielded by Kansas City's galleries comes from the wisdom that accompanies age. Though August 2009 will mark Dolphin Gallery's first year in its West Bottoms location, founder John O'Brien's curatorial vision has defined the space for more than 17 years. The gallery now is off the beaten track, which is symbolic of its underlying *raison d'être*: Something of a trailblazer, Dolphin does not follow trends. Like much of what shows there, the new space is austere, beautiful and approachable.

"The potential of the gallery enables exhibitions of greater scale, broadening the mind beyond the traditional use of space," says locally based textile artist Debra Smith. Her work, along with that of artists Anne Lindberg and Ke-Sook Lee, is on display as part of the Dolphin's "Asiatica" exhibit, which shows through July 3. Purposely keeping a flexible schedule, the gallery also has shown the work of internationally exhibited artists like printmaker Laura Berman and photographer Mike Sinclair.

"The direction of the gallery has been and continues to be showing work that is challenging, provocative and interesting," Dolphin's Emily Eddins says. Though that mission is challenged by the current climate, Kansas City's educated clientele helps artists thrive in an increasingly competitive environment. "There are a number of serious art collectors here in the Midwest, and through local museums and galleries and their own initiative, they follow the trends in other markets," Eddins says. "We enjoy getting to know our clients, (figuring out) their interests and sharing our enthusiasm for art."

And that, truly, is the benefit of living in a city rife with patrons who understand the importance of building collections that contain a variety of work. A prominent Crossroads art space in Kansas City, Byron C. Cohen Gallery for Contemporary Art caters to this audience



by exhibiting artists who offer a unique aesthetic. "I am here to talk about the process and make sure there is value in what (clients) buy," owner Byron Cohen says, "especially when (they are) spending thousands of dollars. It is fine to have a collection that has no specific focus. The importance of collecting is quality."

Also subscribing to the city-wide mission of richness and diversity, Grand Arts makes a formidable impression on the local scene. A nonprofit space supported by the Margaret Hall Silva Foundation, Grand has a kinship with other local nonprofits, including the H&R Block Artspace and Charlotte Street Foundation's Urban Culture Project spaces (La Esquina, Paragraph Gallery and Project Space). Nationally, these galleries share a long-standing devotion with arts organizations like ArtPace in San Antonio, Texas, and Creative Time in New York City; they find artists who push the envelope and, says Grand Arts Artistic Director Stacy Switzer, challenge social and political morays.

The Grand Arts mission serves to advance the conversation, demonstrating how far a concept can go beyond traditional notions of how art "must" look, feel or behave. But no matter the subject on display, the galleries and art spaces in Kansas City mix things up in their own ways, continuing to shape the perception of contemporary art by educating and directing collectors, students and enthusiasts. "Art should be diplomatic," Dolphin Gallery's Eddins says. "We encourage all to enjoy the experience." ▲

OPPOSITE (clockwise): Once exhibited at Grand Arts, William Pope.L's work features an intense reuse of American iconography; "Through the Eyes of a Child" by Chinese painter Deng Wushu, whose first U.S. show runs through September 4 at the Cohen Gallery; The Leedy-Voulikos Art Center has exhibited the work of internationally collected painter Shirley Schnell and (this page, left) emerging artist Tom Strykiewicz. ABOVE RIGHT: The Cohen Gallery also shows the photographs of Hendrick Kerstens, who is inspired by 17th-century Johannes Vermeer paintings.