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ART REVIEW: Rochester Contemporary Members Exhibition

By Rebecca Rafferty on December 23, 2009



The 19th Annual Members Exhibition at Rochester Contemporary. PHOTO PROVIDED

If you're tuned into the arts community in Rochester, you know how many talented people live here. You know the wealth of potential we're working with. But some argue that there is an unfortunate dearth of individuals and institutions willing to facilitate the scene. There are only a few institutions that possess the power and expertise to consistently offer provoking and challenging shows. There are smaller art venues that are willing to give an opportunity to un-established artists. It's hard to offer both, but executive director Bleu Cease will be damned if Rochester Contemporary can't pull it off.

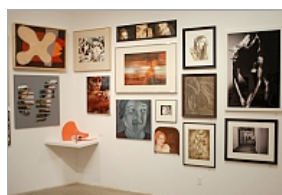
The highly successful "6x6" show and the Members Exhibition are what Cease calls "summer-winter bookends," egalitarian, community-focused shows that frame the multitude of non-local avant-garde shows hosted by the gallery. Rochester Contemporary is offering something rare: each member of the gallery is guaranteed to have work in this exhibition, in the main gallery space, without requiring an exclusive relationship between artists and gallery.

There can be a current of cultural elitism surrounding the issue of conceptual and aesthetic discernment vs. democratization of the scene and the fostering of new local art, but Rochester Contemporary underscores the importance of balancing both, undaunted by potential snobbery that might be directed at a show like this. Fortunately, Cease says, "There aren't that many people who walk in the doors and look at it that way." He cites distinguished local artist Carl Chiarenza as an example: "He has work in every major book written about photography. He could easily choose not to participate in this sort of thing," but Cease holds the photographer's participation in the show as evidence of the made-it artists who take their community seriously.

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Rochester Contemporary Members Exhibition



The Members Exhibition at Rochester Contemporary features more than 250 pieces by dozens of artists. PHOTO PROVIDED

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Cease describes the Members Exhibition's hodge-podge as both "alarming and beautiful." Many recent works from recognizable names in the arts community are mixed in with countless emerging artists, students, and dabblers. Seemingly every medium and every concept is represented, from traditional paintings, to loads of photography, to sculpture, to one tiny video installation, heard throughout the gallery and drawing visitors to its alcove location all siren-like. "Oracle" by Lee Hoag is a tiny television resting atop a Doric column, playing a looped monochrome close-up of a bearded man's lips calmly, authoritatively repeating: "To the essence of being, in all there is, you are one."

One of the challenges of hosting this sort of show is fitting so much diverse art together, especially when the gallery has no way to predict what kind of work it will be receiving. Art is grouped by themes when possible: Robin Whiteman's doll-sized wool sculpture "Bunny Woman," with its delicately detailed face, pear-shaped form, and elegantly elongated auditory organs, is anchored to the wall near other rabbit pieces.

Cease says the members show "brings artists from across the region together to see each other's work," and offers "artists of all levels a professional, though crowded, exhibition opportunity," and a chance for the community to see it all. "The show has become a really interesting snapshot of creative production from across the region," he says. "It brings people together, fosters and builds community. What could be more important?"

This year saw the debut of a few changes to the Members Exhibition, including a members-only hour-long preview before the public opening party. Also added was a performance aspect at Atlantic Avenue venue MuCCC, aimed at "bringing together Rochester's performance artists, which was loose and eclectic, similar to what's going on here," Cease says, gesturing to the walls. Roughly 30 people attended the event, Cease says, calling it "a good start, with lots of potential for further development next year."

A democratic voting method for the best-in-show prize was also instilled. Every time a member visits during the run of the show, they can vote for their favorite work using a yellow dot sticker. "I want the institution to be really neutral; no one person's ideas or tastes guide this award," Cease says. Quite a few works are in the running, but many, many voters have been captivated by the intense stare of the jewel-tone woman in Lacey McKinney's oil "In the Dark No. 3."

With the number of works included in the show, Cease had to address the rising challenge of fitting all of the submissions on the gallery's wall space. Imposing size constraints this year (pieces had to be within 40"x40" was one solution, as participation in this show is consistently on the rise. Both the "6x6" show and the Members Exhibition have "totally outgrown this building," says Cease. He's actively looking for a satellite space specifically for the 2011 members show (he thinks they can fit one more members show in the East Avenue gallery location), "something larger and off site," he says.

"I am not complaining," Cease says. "This is a good problem to have, and actually, I am really touched and encouraged to see this kind of increased response.... Laying out and designing this exhibition so that it fits and makes visual sense, though it is never perfect, is something that I enjoy and put a lot of time into."

As of press time the gallery had sold 21 works. Eleven pieces sold in the one-hour members' preview before the opening. That's a huge improvement on the four pieces sold during the entire run of last year's show. "People say art doesn't sell in Rochester," Cease says. His tone suggests faith in the contrary.

"19th Annual Members Exhibition"

Through January 17

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461-2222, rochestercontemporary.org

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