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# RoCo's Bleu Period



STORY BY ELIZABETH FORBES | PHOTOS BY MATT WITTMAYER

What happens  
when an artist with  
no administrative  
experience takes  
over an art center?

**B**leu Cease had no experience running an arts organization when he was named executive director and curator of the Rochester Contemporary Art Center (a mouthful usually shortened to RoCo). What he did have was a fervent commitment to the cause of contemporary art.

When Cease took over in 2007, RoCo was facing a rocky future. There were funding and institutional problems, and soon would come the challenge of the Great Recession.

Cease threw himself into the work—and he hasn't let up. "He works six or seven days a week for RoCo," says board president Stewart D. Davis, adding with a chuckle, "We hope he sleeps and eats."

People began noticing Cease's unusual blend of skills, meshing artistic



vision with attention to detail, enthusiasm with organizational ability, measured reflection with managerial savvy.

Print artist Zerbe Sodervick recalls how Cease got participants fired up when he launched First Fridays, a monthly event to channel activities at numerous small galleries into one attention-grabbing, "mark your calendar" phenomenon. Sodervick, director of extended studies at RIT's College of Imaging Arts & Sciences, was among the dozen or so people Cease called together to discuss the idea. By the end of that meeting, Sodervick says, everyone had agreed to contribute \$100 to set up a website and launch the event.

Artist Anne Havens, a former RoCo board member (and wife of Stu Davis), says it's partly the *way* Cease interacts with people. "There's something about his ability to engage with them gracefully and respectfully," she says. "He really relates to young people, to any people. .... I guess you'd call his people skills incredible.

Raised in Naples, N.Y., to "hippie parents," Cease returned to Rochester after studying philosophy, psychology and photography at a small liberal arts college in North Carolina. He supported himself as a preparator at George Eastman House while earning his Master's of Fine Arts from Visual Studies Workshop. He also taught history of photography classes and worked as a freelance curator at museums in New York City and elsewhere.

In a way, Cease says, those curating experiences taught him what not to do as a manager. Too often, he recalls, lack of organization led to chaos and stress. In one museum show, he and other staff members ended up sleeping on the gallery floor as they frantically prepared for an opening the next day.

Cease describes himself as "self-taught" when it comes to the "executive director" side of his job at RoCo. But in a few years, Cease has stabilized finances, multiplied attendance, diversified the center's audience and, not incidentally, infused energy into the

Rochester art scene.

"Bleu has been able to make RoCo a wonderfully exciting, challenging place to show contemporary art," says Davis.

Cease says his photography (a body of work ranging from documentary projects in Haiti and China to politically charged street art) "feels like a former life." He now funnels his creativity into designing exhibits and in problem-solving such challenges as running RoCo with himself as the only paid staff member. Cease tackled that one by creating a rigorous internship program that gives him a staff while giving the interns real-world experience.

At times, it seems that he carries RoCo forward through sheer diligence. "I would say not much stops him," says Sodervick. "At one point he was in an accident and he was still there limping around the gallery, never missing a day, never missing a beat, meeting and greeting, writing grants, doing everything you need to do as an administrator. He just carries on."

With his lean build and prematurely graying hair, Cease—who gives his age as "early 30s"—might well be seen as an ascetic in the service of contemporary art. "It's hard to get away for more than two days," he admits, adding, "It's not like I'm always here making important decisions. Sometimes I'm just here sweeping."

Cease seeks to engage and challenge viewers within the white-walled space at 137 East Ave., but his vision extends beyond RoCo's walls. Many of his initiatives serve two overarching goals he sees as vital to RoCo's survival: expanding the art center's audience in breadth as well as depth, and making the center a destination that attracts people from across the region.

**Exhibit A:** The annual bike tour pegged to RoCo's "State of the City" show in August. The show presents artists from around the country who interpret urban issues in the classic gallery forum. The complementary bike tour literally takes to

the streets to illuminate similar issues.

With the bike tour, Havens says, "He was looking at getting people involved in downtown, in the history, and people loved it."

Indeed, Cease estimates that 150 riders joined last summer's trip to local hot spots of graffiti art. Because of that somewhat unwieldy success, this summer's tour of the Inner Loop will be offered twice.

The bike tour's mix of art lovers, local history buffs and cycling enthusiasts is an example of diversifying RoCo's audience, says Cease: "If you come to a couple of openings in a row, you will see different faces. It's really incredible. ... For us to not just be attracting the usual suspects, that's a really important thing for a small space."

**Exhibit B:** First Fridays, which Cease coaxed into being to focus attention on under-the-radar arts spaces. Sarah Lentini, president and CEO of the Arts & Cultural Council for Greater Rochester, praises First Fridays as an undertaking "that has helped to drive more audience at a time when everyone is in need of some additional exposure. I think it's a really important service ... especially for smaller galleries, given that they have smaller resources for promotion."

Though there's little direct payback to RoCo—in fact, it's something of an administrative headache—Cease believes giving smaller venues a way to reach more visitors "has a cumulative benefit to the community. ... It makes this a better city."

Feeling that he can bring about meaningful change is a large part of what drives Cease—and keeps him in a smaller metropolis like Rochester. "There's a real fight to be fought here," he says. "You can make a real difference in this city."

**Exhibit C:** The "6x6" show, which Cease created to replace a hoary auction of donated art. As a fundraiser, the show provides about 15 percent of RoCo's annual budget. Yet Cease sees "6x6" as a way of engaging community participation beyond the boundaries of RoCo's Members'



The RoCo art center during last year's "6x6" show. Thousands of works are for sale at the annual event; this year, RoCo is aiming to have art from all 50 states and beyond.

PANORAMIC PHOTOS BY GERRY SZYMANSKI





Exhibition in December.

For "6x6," all submissions are the same size (6 by 6 inches), sold for the same low price (\$20) and displayed anonymously. That makes the artistic experience more democratic not only for the creators, says Cease, but also for viewers who won't be influenced by prominent names. And because no one's ego is on the line, he can recruit politicians, community leaders and business people to submit pieces.

Cease puts out the call for entries through an international network of websites. Last year, nearly 2,000 artists responded, representing 43 states and 22 countries. His goal for this year: Participation from all 50 states and even more overseas diversity.

The show "has established this huge network of people who are paying attention

to us," he says. "We still are a very small arts center in a very small city, but this thing has grown legs."

Driven largely by the head count for "6x6," attendance at RoCo has grown five-fold since Cease took over in 2007—from a low of 3,205 to 15,600 in the past fiscal year. Cease takes pride in such accomplishments and has set himself further managerial milestones—having a certain amount of money in the bank, adding paid staff, that sort of thing.

But "that's not what would keep me working 80 hours a week," he says. "My biggest goal is to make sure Rochester has a contemporary arts center for the next 30 years."

*Elizabeth Forbes is a freelance writer living in Brighton.*

## On display

- **The Northeast Regional Contemporary Fiber Exhibition** runs through May 9, with an artists' reception at 6 p.m. May 6. The juried show from the California-based Surface Design Association presents 28 works that interpret the nature of fiber art.
- **"6x6x2011: Global"** runs from June 4 to July 10. Visitors can purchase works through RoCo's website or at the opening reception, which runs from 6 to 10 p.m. June 4 (admission: \$5). During exhibitions, the gallery is open 1 to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday (and until 10 p.m. on Fridays). Call 461-2222 or visit [www.rochestercontemporary.org](http://www.rochestercontemporary.org).

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