

Trying times for local galleries

By Cate McQuaid
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Contemporary art is surging in Boston. So why does the gallery scene here continue to be overlooked?

With the Institute of Contemporary Art's growing presence, and the Linde Family Wing for Contemporary Art opening last September at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston is moving from the sidelines to center stage in the world of contemporary art. And there's more institutional attention to come, with a new wing opening this month at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and an expansion in the offing at the Harvard Art Museums.

This is all terrific news, and it can only

help local art galleries, as institutions cultivate a larger audience for contemporary work. But Boston commercial galleries are in a delicate position in a struggling economy, in a city that has not been viewed as supportive of their particular passion since the days of John Singer Sargent. Throw in a rapidly changing business model in which brick-and-mortar shops are less important than art fairs and buying on the Internet, and you've got an especially challenging environment.

"I think Boston is underserved by the number of galleries," says Joseph Carroll, owner of Carroll and Sons, one of the leading galleries in Boston. "Would I advise someone



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From left: Steven Zevitas of Steven Zevitas Gallery, Russell LaMontagne of LaMontagne Gallery, and Camilo Alvarez of Samson.

to open now? I'd say no. The economic climate is still shaky, and it's a tough business."

For years, the lament of Boston artists has been a lack of institutional support, with a particularly gimlet eye cast on the MFA's previously paltry contemporary offerings. Commercial galleries soldiered on despite little museum interest in collecting contemporary art.

The gallery scene in Boston suffered a blow in June 2008, even before the economic collapse, when some leases coming due combined with dealers retiring led to the closing of eight galleries. Since then, two more of Boston's top-flight contemporary dealers have shut their doors — Nielsen Gallery and Judi Rotenberg Gallery — and others have closed, as well, while only a couple have opened. There are fewer than 30 commercial contemporary art galleries in the area, and of those only a handful present rigorous, forward-thinking art.

Three of Boston's edgier galleries, LaMontagne Gallery, Samson, and Steven Zevitas Gallery have banded together as the Boston Contemporary Group, and they'll be at Volta N.Y., in March. Fairs require a significant investment, says Zevitas. "It's \$15,000 for the booth, then there's shipping. It adds up quickly. You have to sell a tremendous amount just to break even." But, he adds, "You never know when the payback will come. We've had art fairs that didn't do well lead to something significant later."

Russell LaMontagne, who owns LaMontagne Gallery, ticks off the indicators of a suffering scene: "The number of closures, the lack of Boston galleries at art fairs, and the lack of Boston galleries on the national art scene." He adds: "I still think there are really good galleries here, and good people running them."

LaMontagne sees a variety of reasons for a scene that the Globe's art critic Sebastian Smece recently called "anemic." He notes competition from New York art consultants, who don't have a gallery's overhead. And he says collectors who buy local do it at benefit auctions, which LaMontagne says compete with gallery sales. "If we had a bigger, more robust market," he says, "it wouldn't be an issue."

Barbara Cole Lee, a private collector who for years headed up the holiday art sale at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, says benefit sales can only help the galleries. "We're getting people excited," Lee says, and advises dealers: "Come to the sale, and bring your business cards."

Boston-area museum curators acknowledge that the gallery scene here is small. But they say it's comparable with those in similar-size cities. They praise the passion and programming of local art dealers. But will all the institutional expansion amount to a pot of gold for Boston galleries?

No museum has been tasked with representing the Boston art scene; they have bigger agendas to worry about. While the programming at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum draws on New England artists, that museum is currently focused on streamlining its collection, not building it, according to curator Dina Deitsch. The ICA, whose biennial James and Audrey Foster Prize exhibition highlights local artists, has no acquisition budget, though a good percentage of work by Boston artists is in its small collection.

The Peabody Essex Museum's contemporary art curator Trevor Smith says his energies are currently going toward programming. The Gardner Museum doesn't plan to collect contemporary art.

That leaves the Harvard Art Museums and the Museum of Fine Arts. Both have deep pockets and are actively developing their contemporary collections. Jen Mergel, the MFA's senior curator of contemporary art, points out that in the Linde Wing's initial installation, five or six of the 80 works on view came to the museum via Boston galleries. That's a healthy number, given the scope of Mergel's purview.

"We are really trying to make the MFA contemporary collection distinctive," she says. "One way to do that is to make sure that the work we show is reflective of this place, and this city."

One such work is the video "Sloss. Kerr. Rosenberg & Moore," by local artists Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom, which the MFA acquired from the Judi Rotenberg Gallery. Of course, many other area museums have chosen works from local galleries, for example the deCordova acquiring Rachel Perry Welty's print "Lost in My Life (price tags)" from Barbara Krakow Gallery; Peabody Essex Museum acquiring Don Kirby's photo "Bluegrass, Bradshaw Road, Fairfield, WA" from Clark Gallery; and the ICA acquiring Taylor Davis's sculpture "Untitled, 2001" from Samson Gallery.

But museum collections don't drive a gallery's success, says Smith of the Peabody Essex. "The people collecting in any serious depth are private individuals. Museums are minor players in the market, from a purely monetary standpoint."

Lee says the way she buys art has changed dramatically in the last decade. "Years ago, we'd get a postcard from a gallery about an artist that we knew, and we'd go to the gallery. Now I can go to the Internet, and see the body of work."

Lee also goes to art fairs. In December she went to Art Basel Miami Beach. "I can discover new artists, see new work," Lee says. "I'm not visiting galleries now, because I just spent my wad

in Miami." Plus, she's not as drawn to local galleries as she once was. "Boston galleries lately have had the air let out of their balloon," she says.

"Local buyers would like to have a part of history," says Barbara Krakow, who opened her blue-chip Barbara Krakow Gallery in 1963. "When you show them local artists, it's, 'Well, no, who else have you got?' How do you get people to trust in themselves, without the attending accolades?"

Galleries are part of a larger ecosystem that includes museums, collectors, art schools, alternative spaces, and nonprofits such as the Boston Center for the Arts, as well as the local community of artists, and critics. In a thriving system, the schools feed the alternative spaces, which feed the commercial galleries, on up to the museums.

In an art world in which mega-galleries like Gagosian Gallery, with satellites around the world, have tremendous clout, regional commercial galleries are called upon to straddle a growing divide between the market and the local makers of art, ideally hoisting the young artists over the gap and into the market.

The grass-roots, non-moneyed elements of the ecosystem suffer. Alternative spaces have lost traction in Boston in the last five years, although new ones have opened recently, such as Yes Oui Si and Lincoln Arts Project. The Mills Gallery at the BCA hasn't had an in-house curator in a couple of years, and the programming has suffered. As ever, students graduating from the art schools often seek greener pastures in New York.

It's never been a closed system. But the Internet cracked it wide open. Galleries do business internationally. So do collectors.

Carroll, who took over Bernard Toale's stable of artists when he started his own business in 2008, says that when Toale opened in the early 1990s, "Bernie was completely supported by Bostonians. When I opened, I was maybe 50 percent supported by Bostonians."

Joanna Fink, the president of the Boston Art Dealers Association and director of Alpha Gallery, a family business for more than 40 years, has seen her clientele change in the last decade. "At least 75 percent of my sales are to institutions and collectors outside of Boston," she says.

Local dealers celebrate their increased reach, but some lament what they see as an erosion of the patronage of Boston collectors. While Zevitas points out that "there's a good clutch of collectors in Boston who are very serious," LaMontagne and Camilo Alvarez of Samson both say they know of area collectors who have gone to New York to purchase work by artists they represent.

"They want to say, 'I got this in New York,'" Alvarez says. He adds that conversely, some New York collectors come to Samson. "I can get better prices," he says.

The Internet cuts both ways, as well. Boston artist Matthew Rich is represented by Samson. He also has his own website.

"Launching my own personal website coincided with my getting shows outside of Boston, based on my website alone," he says. Artists no longer have to live in New York to have their work seen by tastemakers. Art can reach around the world. Still, it requires local support.

"We're all so global," says the deCordova's Deitsch, co-curator of the 2012 deCordova Biennial, which will spotlight New England artists. "But locality does matter, and the people you meet in person do matter, and community matters."

Nonetheless, some collectors still see New York as a magnet. "The number of galleries, the number of artists is enormous. The world is smaller in Boston. The gallery scene is smaller. Boston doesn't take as many risks," says Lee.

The Boston art scene will never compete with the New York art scene. That doesn't mean the galleries here shouldn't be ambitious about commerce and think more creatively about their programming.

"Galleries have to do a little bit more bold a job of presenting," says independent curator Randi Hopkins, a former ICA curator who previously co-ran Allston Skirt, a cutting-edge commercial gallery.

Part of the trick is making an exhibition a draw. Attracting visitors to a gallery in the Internet age is no longer about hanging pictures on the wall. It's about creating an environment that can only be savored in person.

"Programming is key. You don't want placid, innocuous, non-offensive work that has a large audience," says Krakow. "But it's hard to be risk-taking, to do installation, or videos, because there is nobody buying it."

Boston dealers occasionally stage shows that provide revelations to gallery visitors that can't be had on the Internet. This past year Carroll and Sons has done a marvelous job mounting exhibits that added up to more than paintings on the wall. Howard Yezerksi Gallery's recent exhibit of work by Marsden Hartley and John O'Reilly, curated by Trevor Fairbrother, was museum worthy. But only Alvarez has done this consistently at Samson, with performance art, video screenings, and installations.

"There's a conservative streak in this city," observes Zevitas. "Camilo clearly does show after show, trying to rock the boat and get away with as much as he can. But there's a limited audience for that kind of show."

The new institutional commitment to contemporary art may not be a financial lifesaver. But certainly it will grow that audience, develop new collectors, and infuse the art ecosystem, the gallery scene in particular, with new blood.

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