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CHICAGO ARTISTS RESOURCE

Arts Professional Story: Barbara Wiesen

How does the Gahlberg Gallery educate and engage its public?



Since College of DuPage is about 40 minutes west of Chicago, our audience is different from that of the typical Chicago gallery. We're close enough that people do come out regularly from the city for our shows, but just far enough that we're still off many people's radar. For much of our core audience—both students and local residents—Gahlberg Gallery and the adjacent lobby space, are the primary venue to experience contemporary art. For me, understanding that an exhibition is not one of several that a visitor is likely to see in a month, but perhaps the only one, gives the programming a special urgency. Because of this, a different attention to how a season is constructed and the types of work and artists presented is emphasized. This is not a response to what is happening at other local venues but, instead, an

attempt to form a sort of portrait of contemporary practices for this specific and largely underserved audience.

My desire is to bring out the most interesting and innovative art from Chicago, the region and the nation (within the limitations of both budget and space) to serve first and foremost the educational needs of faculty and students, but also to expose the broader local community to innovative and compelling art. Just because we are not located in the center of the city doesn't mean that contemporary culture doesn't matter, but without some direct access to the work, contemporary art can seem obtuse, insular and off-putting. I think it is one thing to talk about practices like the artists collective Simparch (Simparch was founded in 1996 in Las Cruces, NM by Steven Badgett and Matt Lynch. Steve Badgett lives in Chicago, Matt Lynch lives in Cincinnati) or Chicago-based Stephanie Brooks, but it is something very different and far more rewarding to experience it first hand, as well as to engage with it on a direct level and on a daily basis.

For example, Simparch's project "Over your head and too deep? Try juxtaposition semiotics" 2006, organized by Stephen Badgett, focused on his old friend Dr. Paul Cekan who was "interested in why people misread meaning behind ancient icon codes and refused to be corrected". This exhibition was very unique in that Dr. Cekan, a retired psychiatrist, was present in the gallery for the entire duration of the exhibition. He was there to share his ideas with any curious visitor. Some viewers thought it was a garage sale of sorts as they viewed all his stuff through the glass-enclosed space. I often referred to the exhibit as "the museum of misunderstandings". There was a yurt with seating to watch Dr. Cekan's video. There were shelves on both sides of the 80 ft. long gallery filled with all his books and strange collection of objects. There were diagrams on the walls along with sculptural objects (the twin towers and an outhouse) in the space and an office area toward the back complete with a copy machine. In my opinion, this exhibition, by far, was one of the most risky yet unique shows presented in the gallery. The audience was surprisingly very responsive and Dr. Cekan was ecstatic to have an audience to share his ideas with.

I think the most successful educational element of our programming is the free color catalog we produce for each show. The catalog lives on after the exhibition, containing images from, or relevant to, the show, and a commissioned essay(s) by a scholar, artist, or critic intended to help contextualize or elucidate the artists practice or show concept. These catalogs are often utilized by students in coursework, collected by patrons, and are very useful for the exhibiting artists both immediately as well as the long term future.

To initiate a dialog with community members and students we host artist talks, which, while free and open to the public, are typically scheduled during the day for the ease of class attendance.

With the goal of being an educational and cultural resource for both the school and local communities, The College of DuPage has recently begun an initiative to revamp and expand our permanent art collection, which was static for several years. Over the past couple of years we have slowly brought in work by both Chicago and Illinois-based artists (Carol Jackson, Jason Lazarus, Jin Lee, Matthew Giron, and Carrie Gundersdorf), as well as some internationally known artists (Peter Doig, John Baldasari and Buzz Spector). In 2008, we received a generous gift of 106 original Polaroid photographs and 51 black and white silver gelatin prints from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts Photographic Legacy Program. The Polaroids are mostly of headshots of celebrities and friends of

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Warhol's as well as a few torso shots of male nudes, and a few other surprises. The black and white photographs are mostly of Warhol's friends or acquaintances as well as landscapes and interior shots. These works are displayed in public spaces all over campus. Hopefully, in the near future, we will be producing an updated catalog/ map of the permanent collection so visitors can take self-guided tours and use the brochure as an educational document.

Barbara Wiesen is the director and curator of the [Gahlberg Gallery](#) in the McAninch Arts Center at College of DuPage and oversees the College's [Permanent Art Collection](#). She holds a M.F.A. in studio arts from the University of Illinois, Chicago, and has many years of curatorial experience, running a professional gallery, producing exhibition catalogs, and teaching studio art.

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