

Missing: An Art Community

By Phillip Barcio

It's a crisp, early summer Friday night in 1999. There's a buzz in the air as you wander from gallery to gallery in the trendy River North neighborhood of downtown Chicago. You're dressed in your finest denim-on-denim, hitting the dozen gallery openings within a couple of blocks of each other. The crowd includes artists, museum curators, and scores of serious collectors, many of whom will pull out their checkbooks tonight and actually purchase works of art. Punctuated by booze, hors d'oeuvres and, occasionally, sophisticated conversation, you feel the excitement of being part of a scene; part of a community; part of a culture.

Flash forward 20 years. Most of the River North galleries you used to visit have either closed or moved to another neighborhood, just as they left Michigan Avenue back in the 1980s, when that was the hot spot.

It's a story as old as the art field itself: galleries establish a presence in an area; hip crowds descend to see and be seen; restaurants and bars open; property developers buy up the surrounding buildings; rents soar; the galleries leave; and the cycle starts over again.

But something is different this time around, at least in Chicago. There no longer is an "art neighborhood" or district. Galleries are scattering all over the city. Even where a few concentrations of galleries remain, they rarely open shows on the same night. That sense of a scene—the community that used to define Chicago visual arts—is missing.

Zolla/Lieberman

Zolla/Lieberman was a River North pioneer. One of nine art galleries destroyed in the legendary River North gallery fire of 1989, it reopened after the fire and remains a strong presence in the neighborhood today. Lieberman represents established artists like Deborah Butterfield, whose iconic found-object horse sculptures are



currently on view in the gallery. The gallery's reputation allows it the luxury of being able to operate successfully anywhere.

"I am definitely a destination after 45 years in this business," says owner William Lieberman. "I have a strong collecting base that still comes to my gallery. I also do a lot of dinners. Tonight, I'm entertaining. I'm entertaining all week."

The gallery also does a few major fairs. It's a staple at Art Miami. But since so many galleries have left River North, Lieberman says the feel of his business is not the same.

"Do I get enough foot traffic? No. On Saturdays it's really bad here. I miss Catherine Edelman Gallery and Rhona Hoffman and the others. I miss having a lot of galleries, especially for the opening. I work the phones to get enough people here."

But Lieberman has no plans to move. "I like the fact that I'm ten minutes from home," he says. "I like River North. The neighborhood has importance. There's parking, there's restaurants. I love my space. If I wasn't 65, I would have some other options. I'm staying put."

Jean Albano

A couple blocks away, Jean Albano Gallery has occupied its current location in River North since 1995. "River North used to be filled with nothing but galleries," says Albano. "It was really fun. When we would have a Friday night opening, we would have hundreds of people come in. I'm not saying they were all buyers, but it was a happening thing to do. Then there was the fire. It burned tons of galleries. The amount of art that was lost was terrible. That was '89. But still everyone moved over here. When I came here, it was because I wanted to be where everybody else was. But now it's been like 10 little teddy bears."

One by one, Albano's art colleagues have left.



“A lot of the galleries are gone totally. Or they’re moving west. If I was 15 years younger, I probably would have moved. For a gallery to come into this neighborhood, right now, they would be crazy. But we’ve been here a long time. We got known for showing a lot of the Imagists early on. So, I have become sort of a destination gallery.”

Some of the change, Albano believes, is generational.

“Younger people, with some exceptions, are not as turned on to the art world as the generation before them,” she says. “I’m not talking about financial, that they can’t do it, it’s just not what they’re interested in. They don’t teach art in schools, so nobody has exposure to it. They grow up and get money and go to basketball games and sit on the floor.”

Albano says technology and the increase in art fairs have also affected the business.

“We started pre-internet,” she says. “I’m laughing that when I used to send out a postcard, I had this system where you would Xerox the labels and put them on 500 cards and mail them out. Now you push a button. Ten years from now it will be different. And there are so many art fairs. It’s easier for collectors to go to the art fair than go to individual galleries. We did Art Miami last year and 85,000 people walked through there. Even EXPO Chicago gets 35,000 people. It’s considered the thing to do... I know a lot of people who go and who never have bought a piece of art and never will, but you’re supposed to be there.”

Stephen Daiter

Across the street from Albano, Stephen Daiter has watched River North evolve. From his gallery windows on the fourth floor of 230 W. Superior Street, he overlooks the Brown Line and Purple Line CTA tracks.

“In the last gallery guide, there were 19 members listed here,” Daiter says. “Now there are 13. Six left in a two-year period.”

Daiter deals in what he calls “classic focused” photography, meaning photographers who take a masterly approach to their craft. Marvin E. Newman’s work is currently on view in the gallery. Daiter also represents Dawoud Bey, whose acclaimed exhibition, “Night Coming Tenderly, Black” recently closed at the Art Institute



of Chicago. When he opened, Daiter says, the costs of running a gallery were lower, so smaller players could afford to put in the time to build a reputation.

“It’s always been the case in the arts community that to make good, cover your expenses and take a few dollars home, it takes a while. I was lucky to establish myself in the ‘90s. A lot of younger galleries that started 15 or 10 years ago, they did interesting things, but they still closed in a few years.”

Despite watching his colleagues leave River North one by one, Daiter intends to stay. Only about two percent of his business by volume is local. “We wouldn’t stay open a month for what we sell through the door,” he says. “For the past five years, our business has been more than half museums and institutions. The other half is serious collectors. Since I’m not dependent on inside sales, I have no desire to move out of this neighborhood, even though there’s more closures than openings. The location is easy to get to when out-of-town people come through. Plus, my staff gets here by public transit. It’s nice to have people come and take a look; I like having other galleries here; but does it increase our sales? No.”

Carl Hammer

One block east from Daiter, Carl Hammer Gallery deals in outsider art. Though also a destination gallery, its owner, Carl Hammer, feels something has been lost as galleries have dispersed throughout Chicago.

“I’m in my third location,” Hammer says. “I opened in 1979 at the 620 N. Michigan location where all the major galleries were. It was a great building. All the established galleries were there. I was teaching high school at Evanston High. My wife and I met there. She was restless and didn’t want to teach any longer. We had been collecting and selling out of our home for years. I said, hey, if you’re not happy teaching, let’s open a gallery where all the other galleries are. I wish that particular situation still existed.”

“I used Richard Gray as a role model in terms of how he conducted himself and interacted with the public. He was so kind and generous. He would always ask my opinion. I was nobody back then, but he still asked.



I wish we still had that kind of community connection, with galleries who knew each other and respected each other. I learned to be a gallerist by that kind of exposure, and that kind of experience of having other gallerists around to talk to and learn from. Community was a true characteristic of those early days.”

That community also extended to collectors, says Hammer.

“The collecting community doesn’t come flocking in as they used to. They catch up over the internet. I’ve always felt going to the gallery is much more rewarding. The internet loses something of the magic and the romance of getting involved with a body of art. I’ve always had the philosophy that you have to see it in person.”

Despite the changes he has seen, however, Hammer has no plans to move. “I could operate anywhere, I’m comfortable where I am.”

Tom McCormick

A mile west from River North, in the West Loop, there is a micro-universe of contemporary art galleries co-existing at 835 West Washington Blvd. Tom McCormick and Kavi Gupta bought the building decades ago and both run galleries in the space. When they first invested in the neighborhood, property was cheap—a huge draw for art dealers.



“Twenty years ago, when we opened this place, you could walk to 20 galleries in the West Loop,” says McCormick. “You could get some synergy on opening night. There was a sense of community, which was terrific. Then all this monkey business in development started. All of the stuff that made the area neat is being destroyed by 14-story buildings that are cookie-cutter and look the same as any other neighborhood on the face of the planet. I hate what’s happened to the West Loop. It’s just a developer’s wet dream and the byproduct is there’s not really an art neighborhood anymore. Art galleries need affordable rent, because it’s hard to make money in the art gallery game. So, everybody got forced out. It’s pure economics. I’m here because we own the building. If I didn’t own this building, I’d be over in West Town. I think very few art galleries are

fortunate enough to own the building in which they have a gallery.”

Unlike many dealers I talked to, McCormick’s bread and butter comes largely from local buyers. It’s a niche he has nurtured.

“Starting out, I had a pickup truck and a hundred bucks, and I tooted around the Midwest buying things and selling things. I didn’t make much money, but I learned a shitload and it was fun. Chicago has never been a gangbuster place to do retail but, if you knuckle down and pay attention to what your strengths are and know who your audience is, you can do alright.”

As for art fairs, McCormick says that world has also changed.

“I’m sick and tired of doing art fairs,” he says. “They’re not productive any more, they cost a fortune, and they take ten days of your life you never get back. Last year, we did Art Miami, and I could have made more money staying home in bed than I did going down there and putting up with that horse shit. We’ve put a lot more effort into the fact that we have a very nice destination location in the third biggest city in the country. I’ve gone back to the old brick and mortar model, and I’m really happy with it. I do all of this with one full-time employee. I always have. If the trash needs taken out, I take it out. I’m just kind of old-fashioned, I guess. You probably have a whole different mindset if you’re in your thirties. You probably do all your business on your phone.”

Kavi Gupta

Upstairs, Kavi Gupta also has no plans to move. The gallery also operates a project space on nearby Elizabeth Street and, based on their well-attended openings in both locations, it is definitely a local destination.

Unlike McCormick, he wholeheartedly embraces the art fair ecosystem. So far this year, the gallery has participated in Felix LA, the Armory Show and Frieze New York and supported three of their artists from AFRICOBRA in an exhibition at the Venice Biennale. In the coming months, Gupta will be at EXPO Chicago, Frieze London, Frieze Masters, and Art Basel Miami Beach.



“Our gallery from the start was always focused on building a national and international collector base. We wanted to be a global gallery located in Chicago,” says owner Gupta. “A lot came from looking at failed galleries here. They were waiting for someone to do something for them. I wanted to be proactive, to go find the collectors who wanted to buy Chicago art. That tended to be collectors in LA, New York and Europe. Chicago has been our smallest market, but we used the advantages of being here, such as affordable real estate and large spaces. We’ve been able to publish a lot of books and catalogues to help disseminate information, because we had the financial means to do it.”

Gupta’s international reputation was aided by his co-founding of Volta, a collateral fair to Art Basel Switzerland, in 2005. “Back then younger galleries weren’t being shown at major art fairs,” Gupta says. “Being able to produce art fairs in Europe helped build our international base. I never even thought of us as being a regional gallery. Nothing against Chicago. The art world just became global and we were global from the start.”

Carrie Secrist

Sharing the building with McCormick and Gupta is Carrie Secrist Gallery. Owner Secrist calls herself “one of the youngest old dealers around.”

“We opened in ‘92,” she says, “Originally, we were in River North. We moved here in 2003. In the 27 years I’ve seen this business, it barely resembles what it was. It was really focused on gallery programming back then, on exhibitions. When I opened, there were only three art fairs in the world, and Art Chicago was the only contemporary one. Also, the internet was not as prevalent. So, it was really about the community and people coming to see the exhibitions, and the dialogue between the artist and the space. Quite frankly, I prefer it that way.”

“The community now is more spread apart. In a way, it kind of reflects how the rest of the art world is behaving. It’s much more of a fair-driven, internet-driven situation. But there’s fair fatigue, and that model is starting to break. But I, being the old relic that I am, still have an AOL account. I’m trying to keep the



focus on the gallery exhibition, for the artist. It’s the idea of a longer look than three days at a fair. The artists we work with appreciate that, taking a breath and focusing on the progression of the work and not just the market.”

This, Secrist says, helps make hers a destination gallery. People have learned over the years that they have to come to the space in order to really appreciate what she is doing.

“I make a joke that the art I show looks like crap online because you can’t begin to see what I do unless you see it in person,” she says. “There’s an experience that happens when you’re in front of it that cannot be mimicked online.”

As for moving, Secrist has a deep affinity for her current location. “I like our space,” she says. “This building is very much a place to be. The space is large and it’s one of the nicer ones in the city. We’ve been able to use it to expand and contract around different exhibitions.”

Secrist also has a positive relationship with the development happening in the West Loop. She was asked to curate work in 22 luxury units being developed at 900 West Washington, a new high-rise across the street.

“On every other floor I’ve done a solo presentation or a strongly curated exhibition,” she says. “People who have seen it say it’s like having a secret museum in the city. I also plan on doing some programming there during EXPO. The units have cement floors and white walls, like beautiful gallery spaces. It’s kind of like the notion of a new salon.”

If more people can embrace the essential idea—that it is important to get out and see art in person, face to face, and to interact with the people who make, sell, collect and show art—perhaps the idea of a true Chicago art community might one day re-emerge.

Phillip Barcio is an art writer and fiction author whose work appears regularly in *Hyperallergic*, *IdeelArt*, *La Gazette Drouot* and the *New Art Examiner*. His fiction has appeared in *Space Squid* and the *Swamp Ape Review*. He has work forthcoming in *Western Humanities Review*.

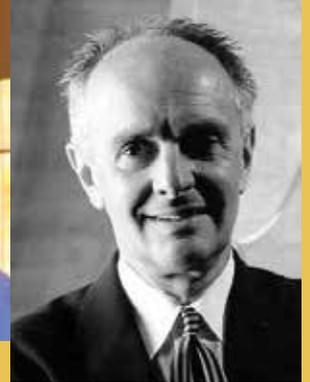
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