

Artists

To stay or not to stay: the creative dilemma

Chicago is a great place to make work, but it struggles to compete with New York when it comes to forging a career

CHICAGO. Earlier this year, the Renaissance Society sponsored a panel discussion with a title that simultaneously posed and answered a question: "Chicago Artist? Is there Such a Thing Anymore?". Philip von Zweck, a participating artist, captured the zeitgeist best when he said: "I don't know what a Chicago artist is, but I don't want to be reduced to one."

As an incubator, Chicago is arguably one of the strongest cities in the country for art. It is institutionally driven, replenished yearly by students, visiting artists and faculty. The School of the Art Institute (SAIC) consistently churns out the MFAs—some stay, some get teaching gigs. The faculties at University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), University of Chicago (UC), Northwestern University and even Columbia College Chicago are smaller but equally accomplished. To know who most of the established or mid-career artists are in town, you just have to look at the faculty roster—Inigo Manglano-Ovalle, Sabrina Raaf, Tony Tasset, Dan Peterman at UIC; Laura Letinsky, Jason Salavon, David Schutter, Catherine Sullivan at UC; Dawoud Bey at Columbia; Jeanne Dunning, Lane Relyea, Michael Rakowitz, Judy Ledgerwood at Northwestern. SAIC's giant faculty includes Ken Fandell, Michelle Grabner, Jim Lutes, Nick Cave, Gaylen Gerber and Tiffany Holmes.

Kerry James Marshall no longer teaches at UIC, but is still based in Chicago.

Stephanie Smith, the curator of contemporary art at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art, points out that it's a golden age not just for studio arts but for the area's art history departments. "There is a really lively culture of collaborative discussion across the curatorial artistic scholarly communities," Ms Smith said.

In that spirit, Renaissance Society curator and director of education Hamza Walker has curated "Our Literal Speed: an Exhibition Accompanying a Conference", an oral spectacle/conference produced by UC in association with Art Chicago, the Art Institute, UIC, the Renaissance Society and the Smart Museum. The exhibition runs until 4 July at UIC's Gallery 400.

As a place to make work, Chicago is affordable, which makes it undeniably great. As a place to build or sustain an art career, it's on less solid ground. "It's not a very good place for historically significant artists to stay because you don't have the press," art dealer Rhona Hoffman said.

"Chicago is a real active centre, but there is no critical voice and we don't have a strong collector base [for local artists]," said Dan Devening, artist and SAIC teacher who also runs Devening Projects + Editions



from an artist-occupied warehouse near Garfield Park.

Some argue that there is no art "scene" in Chicago, where art activity is diverse, fractured, collaborative and isolated all at the same time. Non-commercial art spaces and apartment galleries, however, are thriving, and some of the most exciting art in Chicago is being shown there, not in the commercial galleries. In the Bridgeport neighbourhood, the Co-Prosperity Sphere recently sponsored the NFO EXPO, billed as a trade show of experimental art.

A current exhibition demonstrates Chicago's DIY ethos. "Artists Run Chicago" (10 May-5 July), planned to coincide with the opening of AIC's Modern Wing, is a look at the artist spaces from the past decade including Old Gold and Mini Dutch, and defunct spaces such as Dogmatic (where Paul Chan lived while a student at SAIC). Britton Bertran, one of the curators, said that because of the lack of commercial enterprises for artists in Chicago, there is a huge amount of creative energy that has to go somewhere. "Artists have enough gumption and willpower to do this on their

own", Mr Bertran said. Appropriately, the exhibition is being held at the Hyde Park Art Center, an artist-run space that promoted The Hairy Who, which celebrates its 70th birthday this year.

In July, the gallery Corbett vs Dempsey will mount the exhibition "Big Youth: New Painters from Chicago", showing the work of a dozen artists including Carl Baratta, Jason Karolak and Rachel Niffenegger. "There is a kind of feeling like 1966, where the guiding influence might have been Peter Saul, but instead it's Peter Doig," said John Corbett.

In 2001, the Museum of Contemporary Art began its "12x12" series, partly to address the perennial gripe about the MCA not showing local artists. Up to 11 artists a year are chosen by a committee of curators. To qualify, artists must be out of school and still living in Chicago. The idea behind the series is to help to launch artists' careers by giving them their first museum show.

Curator Lynne Warren, who manages the project, said that there have been artists who had planned their New York or Los Angeles moves while they were

Scott Hocking, *Ziggurat—East*, 2008, upcoming at "Heartland"

preparing their shows. "What I'm most surprised by is how many have stayed," Ms Warren said. Among the artists with "12x12" shows who are active in Chicago are Juan Angel Chavez, Scott Fortino, Deb Sokolow, Stan Shellabarger, Lora Fosberg, Christine Tarkowski, Von Zweck, Cody Hudson and Mark Booth. Photographer Brian Ulrich has become nationally known, winning a 2009 Guggenheim Fellowship.

Rashid Johnson moved to New York (still represented by Monique Meloche in Chicago); Clare Rojas and Melanie Schiff went west (Kavi Gupta Gallery still shows their work).

With the opening of the Modern Wing, there is hope that the national and international audience that it draws will trickle down to the galleries and art spaces in Chicago. "I think it is going to be very rejuvenating for the contemporary art scene here," said Ms Meloche.

One of Chicago's most influential and successful artists, Tony Fitzpatrick, has no institutional affiliation. He says Chicago is "a great city to live

and to make work [in]". When it comes to business, however, he is happy with his Brooklyn-based gallery Pierogi. The other anomaly in Chicago is Dzine, a former graffiti artist who is now represented by Jeffrey Deitch.

The question of whether an artist should move to New York doesn't go away. Bernard Williams, who got his MFA at Northwestern in 1990, still ponders whether he should have made the move after graduate school. "I got stuck with the old guard...those guys were at home working," he said. "It had a detrimental effect on my momentum." Last year, Williams split a studio in Brooklyn with another artist and while it drained his resources, he said it was crucial to building more relationships with the national art community.

But opportunities exist for artists no matter where they live. "Heartland", an exhibition currently at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, and coming to the Smart Museum in the autumn, might put the whole idea of New York as "the centre" to rest.

Ruth Lopez

Chicago fairs

Art Chicago
1-4 May 2009
222 Marchandise Mart Plaza

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The annual fair brings together a mass of international exhibitors offering art enthusiasts, collectors and curators a chance to survey both current and historic art in a wide variety of mediums. New exhibits this year include "The Hairy Who and Imagist Legacy in Contemporary Art", a tribute to the Chicago Imagists movement, and "Salute to

decorative art from around the globe. Over 400 established and emerging artists combine to showcase a mixed media extravaganza of contemporary glass art, wood sculpture, American and European jewellery, and furniture design. Works by furniture designer Thomas Hucker, silver vessels by Hiroshi Suzuki and glass sculpture by Shayna Leib will add to the event's eclectic mix of decorative art. Its third edition (the second is held in New York, see p66)