

Urban Culture Project's 'Cumulus' explores collaborative creative process

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Special to The Star

During the Jan. 15 opening reception for “Cumulus,” a curated show of works by artists in the Urban Culture Project’s Studio Residency program, studio residents traded drawings with visitors, rolled down steps, spun records and peddled snacks from a vending cart.

Visit the show on a Thursday or Saturday afternoon and the absence of these artists and their audience is palpable — the gallery feels like a storage room for the tools and the results of creative expression.

This sterile atmosphere does not necessarily reflect the quality of the works but instead the inherent trickiness of displaying performance-based art.

“Cumulus” functions more like a laboratory than an art show, providing space devoted to evolving projects and multimedia experimentation.

UCP awards downtown studio spaces for yearlong terms to almost 30 visual and performing artists. The call-for-proposals for “Cumulus” asked these residents to “consider collaboration or interactivity in the making and/or presentation of the work.” A four-person panel drawn from the UCP Curatorial Committee made final selections for the show.

Some works that made the cut are designed to change over the course of the exhibition, such as Julie Malen and Calder Kamin’s “Urban Still Life: An Evolving Field Guide of Kansas City.” The two artists create realistic ceramic sculptures of dead animals they find in the city — cockroaches, a possum, duck and rat — and add them to their installation.

Caleb Taylor and Juniper Tangpuz plan to switch out their contribution midway through the exhibition. The follow-up to their cut-paper piece “The Conversation That Never Ends!” will be a new work that delves deeper into themes of visual dialogue and language but involves more technical difficulty.



Lori Bury's contribution to the “Cumulus” show encourages visitors to add their own creations to the exhibit.

Other artists deepen the relationship between artwork and viewer by getting visitors directly involved. For “Resistance,” Paul Shortt left two stacks of posters for gallery-goers to take with them. Lori Bury sets out paper, paint and markers for audience members to create their own drawings in “Give and Take.”

According to exhibition organizer Julia Cole, relationships themselves have become key material in contemporary artistic practice.

“Many artists today are interested in what it means to work in a community, which may be something that they feel is less evident in life than they would like.”

For years, Kansas City artists have used collaborative and interactive methods. Take, for instance, Jaimie Warren and Dylan Mortimer, two of the three artists awarded fellowships last year from the Charlotte Street Foundation, UCP’s parent organization.

Mortimer’s 2004 piece “Cautionary Church” consisted of a religious service including a preacher and real gospel choir.

Over the past four years, Warren has shared the stage with hundreds of performers, including members of such disparate acts as Civil War re-enactors and hip-hop dancers, as part of her faux public access television show, Whoop Dee Doo.

The Charlotte Street Foundation continues to support collaborative, interactive and community-spirited work through programs like the recently announced Rocket Grant, funded by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and distributed through Charlotte Street. The application guidelines encourage project proposals with “potential for meaningful impact in/on the community, regional art ecology, and other artists.”

Although some “Cumulus” artists have a history of working collaboratively, this exhibition inspired many to work hand-in-hand with their studio mates for the first time. After receiving the call-for-proposals, Jane Gotch, a choreographer and former dancer, contacted all UCP studio residents seeking possible collaborators. Visual artists Timothy Amundson and Erica Mahinay responded, and the trio worked together to create a performance called “The Four Seasons.” Mahinay made the costumes, while Amundson designed the sound and lighting, and Gotch choreographed and performed the work.

“The finished project was completely different than anything I’ve ever been a part of or would have created on my own,” Mahinay said. Designing costumes for “The Four Seasons” helped fuel ideas for her paintings. She and Gotch have begun collaborating on additional projects. “The Four Seasons” was Gotch’s first occasion working with visual artists.

“It was challenging, and it expanded my range of thinking about my work,” she said. “Collaborating helps you develop people skills. And it’s scary, because you are not in control. You have to trust other people.”

“Cumulus” provided Gotch the opportunity to bring modern dance into a space normally reserved for visual art, expanding its audience. Also included in the exhibition is “The Little People,” a video by Lisa Marie Evans of a dance performed and choreographed by UCP studio resident Maura Michelle Garcia.

The work with the potential to reach the most widespread audience is “S’mores Cart” by Kurt Flecksing and Sean Starowitz, a duo who have been swapping art ideas since 2007. The two artists received help in designing the logo, sewing the awning and fabricating the cart. Taped to its side is a temporary food permit signed by a city health inspector.

Opening night, Flecksing and Starowitz sold 85 hand-roasted s’mores for a dollar each. They plan to use the proceeds to fund a grant for like-minded artists.

In the gallery, photographs of “The Gypsy Bird Project,” a mobile chicken coop by artist Theo Bunch, are displayed alongside the cart. Flecksing and Starowitz nominated Bunch, who aims to raise awareness of Kansas City’s poultry ordinances through his work, as a recipient of their s’mores grant. In doing so, they hope to draw attention to the ways in which the Kansas City community supports artists whose work engages the public in unexpected ways.

the show

“Cumulus: An Urban Culture Project Studio Residency Program Focus Exhibition” continues at the Paragraph Gallery, 23 E. 12th St., through March 4. Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Thursday and Saturday.

A second opening for the exhibit will be from 6 to 9 p.m. Friday and will feature Aaron Storck’s performance of “The Wizard Ningxt” and s’mores for sale by Sean Starowitz and Kurt Flecksing.

On Saturday, Kemper Museum curator Barbara O’Brien and Kansas City Art Institute painting professor Julie Farstad will lead a public discussion about the show from 1 to 2:30 p.m.

At 6 p.m. Wednesday, the gallery will present a “Potluck Drawing Session” in which visitors can make a drawing and take a drawing and bring a snack or dish to share (optional). From 7 to 9 p.m., there will be performances of “Reperformance,” organized by Charlie Mylie, and “The Four Seasons.” Admission to the show and events is free. For more information, call 816-221-5115 or visit www.charlottestreet.org.