

Roots & Culture Contemporary Art Center

Eric May's art start-up Roots & Culture is here to stay.

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By Joanne Hinkel



photo: Interior of Roots & Culture Contemporary Art Center, courtesy of Eric May.

Art start-ups come and go, but four-month-old Roots & Culture Contemporary Art Center seems here to stay. The most recent addition to the growing list of experimental art spaces in the near west neighborhoods of River West, East Village and Wicker Park, the not-for-profit has received rave reviews for its apartment-cum-art-gallery shows and "for the people" mission.

Founder Eric May's resume is chock-full of community-based work; the School of the Art Institute of Chicago alum has worked at Beacon Street Gallery, After School Matters and currently as head chef at Ox-Bow School of Art in Saugatuck, Michigan. So it makes sense that his gallery's programming is designed to support and connect Chicago artists: May offers artist residencies, encourages collaborative exhibitions, invites in guest curators and plans to host dinner parties that he'll prepare for on-site, putting his culinary prowess to use.

I sat down with May to discuss how his brainchild can help to create a family out of Chicago's art world.

Why start this art space in Chicago now?

This had been a long-term dream of mine. When I found this space for sale, I came in here and knew immediately that I wanted to open the gallery. It's a beautiful space and it's in a great location. This is an ideal neighborhood for a new gallery district, being close to the West Loop, between Wicker Park and West Town.

How does Roots & Culture stand out in the Chicago art scene?

I've been involved with the Ox-Bow School for about 10 years, and eight years of it I've been on staff. At Ox-Bow, artists work together and live together as a community; it's sort of an updated commune environment. That's the spirit and energy that I wanted to bring here. Chicago has a funny art scene. We have this sort of identity crisis in that we're always trying to keep up with the coasts. There's a big art scene, but it's insecure. We've got one of the best art schools in the country and a steady influx of talent coming into town, but there are also a lot of bitter and competitive attitudes. It's part of my mission to make this a place that's comfortable.

Where did the name Roots & Culture come from?

My favorite kind of music is reggae. The idea for the name was originally inspired by the Roots & Culture movement in Jamaican history, when popular culture in Jamaica took a shift towards being socially aware and relevant. I saw this as a parallel [to what I'm trying to do here].

You select art that is...

It's not necessarily always me that's selecting the work. I'm removing myself from the role of curator and gallerist and trying to establish a forum for the Chicago art community. I chose the artists for shows this month and in March but won't curate another show until November. There will be a number of guest curators. I've invited a few and a few have sent proposals.

Why operate as a non-profit rather than a commercial art gallery?

I want to support the artist. That's what I'm here for. I'd say that it's a cutthroat world in the commercial gallery world here, though I think we're on the brink of more attention.

If we remember one thing about your gallery it's...

That it's a comfortable place to spend an afternoon looking at art.

When you're not at your gallery, you're checking out art at...

I look at all the nearby galleries and I try to go to openings in the West Loop. I prefer the younger, more emerging type of spaces. Kavi Gupta Gallery is always good. I like the shows at my neighbors, 65Grand and Corbett vs. Dempsey.

Any more programs or events we should know about?

The monthly film screenings curated by Alexander Stewart here are going to continue. "Spring Break," curated by artledge, will be opening the weekend after Art Chicago. I'm really looking forward to "Mr. Softy," a group show of soft sculptural works, happening in March.