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'rak'rūm (noun);
the back room of an art gallery
where artists and art lovers hang

Eric May



Carmen Price, *Activity Parade*,
2006, gouache on paper, 22"X 30"
© the artist, courtesy of Roots & Culture

Eric May is the director of Roots & Culture gallery in West Town, Chicago. Eric graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and also works occasionally as head chef at their affiliated Ox-Bow School of Art, located in Saugatuck, Michigan. [\[more\]](#)



Inteview with Roots & Culture

CHICAGO-- I corresponded with the Director of [Roots & Culture gallery](#), Eric May, about his inspiration for starting up a space, and how he sees it fitting within the Chicago art community. Ever humble and good-humored, Eric was nice enough to conduct this interview with me via e-mail while he's away in Southwest Michigan presiding over the Ox-Bow School of Art's kitchen as Head Chef.

- Thea Liberty Nichols

Thea Liberty Nichols: What compelled you to open a gallery? Do you have any previous experience in that sort of thing, or did it stem out of your studio art practice ?

Eric May: I wouldn't say that I stumbled into the gallery business, since at the time I opened Roots & Culture [R&C], I had been working for another nonprofit gallery for three years as well as a healthy relationship with the alternative curation scene going on at the time. I also can't say that opening my own gallery was a burning ambition at the time, however much sense it makes now. The main impetus to open R & C was finding the amazing space at 1034 N. Milwaukee Ave. It has many attractive features- from the rich history of the building, to the unconventional Flat Iron style triangular space, as well as room to build out a residential loft, a serious kitchen, and the downstairs shop and studios. Ultimately, it seemed like a good idea due to its conspicuous location on a heavily trafficked thoroughfare at street level. It is a comfortable and multi-purposed space with a good deal of visibility.

TLN: When you landed at your current space on Milwaukee and Noble, did you feel like a pioneer, that R & C was an outpost ? How, if at all, do you think R & C contributes to the redevelopment of that neighborhood ?

EM: This is a tricky one. The weird thing about Noble Square is how it feels a bit more diverse than all of the neighborhoods surrounding it. It has more slowly begun to gentrify than say, Wicker Park and Ukrainian Village. I have seen condo developments springing up left and right, cute and quickly popular coffee shops opening, and more and more fancy dogs populating my neighborhood. So indeed, the area is gentrifying. How desirable our ragtag nonprofit art center appears to the real estate market is unclear. I like my block a lot and the few others surrounding me. The Insight Tatoo guys are great (and good artists too), I'm not sure exactly what happens at the Arabia Hookah Cafe across the street. Ron Smith and his Ride bike shop are a very welcome addition to the neighborhood. As I've said, there is a very popular new coffee shop too, but I'm more of a tea guy. Chicago Ave. is rad, from cheap sammies at Swim, to my beloved Habana Libre, Sonotheque next store, and across the street is [Shane Campbell](#), to the immensely authentic boricuano lunch counter at Cafe Central and the live poultry spot across Ashland Ave. It feels like New York sometimes. I like to think that we fit in well to this breadth of culture in a small, obscure little slice of Chi-town. I hope that more galleries open near by and that I can always walk two blocks to get a freshly slaughtered rabbit to make paella with.

TLN: Were you drawn to the space itself or it's physical location? Can you tell us a little bit about how R & C is organized between exhibition space and living space ?

EM: Maybe I began to answer this above. To fully map out all the activities, though- Downstairs we have an 800 square foot space- it functions as an office and personal headquarters to Mike Wolf and his Network of Cumulative Art, studios to Ryan Fenchel, Carmen Price, and myself and also storage and saw zone. The gallery floor is about 1600 square feet, most of which is the open-to-the-public part of it all (including the quasi-functional and perpetually cluttered office). There is a 700 square foot apartment on a lofted mezzanine, which clearly separates the main floor into the main gallery with 16 foot ceilings and the kitchen and reception area with an 8 foot ceiling. I live up there with a rotating cast of renters and my cats, Quintron and Miss Pussycat. I've noticed that many gallerists have apartments stashed away in their spaces, I think its the only way a lot of us can afford to do what we do.

TLN: [Since you're kind of on the cusp of what was formerly the West Town Gallery Network, can you tell us a little bit about your relationship with other galleries in the neighborhood \(65GRAND, Lloyd Dabler, Corbett vs. Dempsey etc.\), and/or how R&C fits in to the larger Chicago gallery constellation ?](#)

EM: We were a part of the West Town Gallery Network during the final season. I thought it was a great time and a great concept, especially in the first year with 40000 on Augusta and Booster & Seven kicking it. I like to think of myself as a citizen in the art community and am invested in building relationships, so I fully support all the galleries that you mention. The business is such that things morph rapidly, though, so the gallery landscape in "West Town" always has shifting going on. [Corbett Vs. Dempsey](#) is certainly a stronghold. Bill Gross at [65GRAND](#) has an always impressive program. A really cool new alt-film space called the Nightengale opened up literally a block up Milwaukee Ave. [Dabler](#) is just around the corner from them. [Green Lantern](#) holds it down up in Wicker Park. [Shane Campbell](#) is down the street. There's a lot going on. I would love to see galleries open up all around the hood. Its great because we are only a mile or less from the West Loop and nearby so much night life.

TLN: [Is it lonely at the top, Eric? Or do you have a collective of pals and peers working alongside you?](#)

EM: I have amazingly supportive friends. They helped me build the space and are there with me through all the other dirty work. Also, I like to make the space as welcoming and supportive as possible to my artists, so I get a really great bullpen view and immediate dialogue with them. It is never lonely.

TLN: [What's one thing you know now that you wish you knew then?](#)

EM: Oh, I don't know, I think that I am still learning. Ask me this in three more years or so!

--Thea Liberty Nichols

[Roots & Culture Contemporary Art Center](#) is located at 1034 N MILWAUKEE, CHICAGO, IL 60622.

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