

NewCity 12/14/2006:

Eye Exam

Open Space

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After about three decades of remaining relatively quiet, independent artists are finally beginning a new movement. Alternative spaces have managed to exist no matter what the trend, but they often come in with a bang and quickly go out with a fizzle. But Eric May, owner of the newly opened Roots and Culture in Wicker Park, has managed to find a way to bridge the gap between apartment art space and stuffy gallery by creating a nonprofit community space that aims to encourage visitors to linger with the art, rather than viewing and quickly leaving. His mission, which ultimately involves guest curators, brunch events, a film series and lectures in addition to actual showings, may seem overly ambitious for one man. But with several years of curation under his belt and a prime location on Milwaukee Avenue, May may have just hit the jackpot. He sat down with me last week to chat about the gallery's mission and the changing atmosphere within the local arts community.

Tell me a little about your involvement with the art scene in Chicago before you opened the gallery.

I am a graduate of the School of the Art Institute. I grew up in Chicago and have always had a connection to the art community in some way. I think my most hands-on involvement is that I've worked at the Ox-Bow Summer School of Art in Saugatuck, Michigan, and a lot of the faculty and administration is run through the Art Institute. As far as curating shows in Chicago, I've worked for Beacon Street Gallery for the past three years. I've curated a few shows in alternative spaces with my friends at Art Ledge. I feel like Chicago has a really rich history in sort of nonprofit alternative and artist-run spaces. Like, in the late seventies and early eighties, N.A.M.E. Gallery and Randolph Street Gallery were really central to the goings on in the art scene here. And I feel like the past few years, especially in this neighborhood, the West Town and Ukrainian Village and Wicker Park area has really developed into sort of an art community. That sort of energy was inspiring to me. I've always kicked around the idea of opening a space. I'm interested in the alternative/apartment space as a movement, but it really

wasn't until I found this physical space that I was inspired to make something happen.

What was it about this space that was so inspiring?

For one thing, the location on Milwaukee Avenue. It also had room to open this semi-professional cooking facility, which is going to be a big part of my programming. As a nonprofit, fundraising events are going to be a major way I keep this space running. I'm actually the head chef at Ox-Bow School, and some of my friends that work up there with me live in Chicago. So this is going to be kind of a satellite of the Ox-Bow kitchen. This stove is actually comes from Ox-Bow. I feel like galleries may not be inviting enough, so what I want to do here is create a homey atmosphere.

I read that you are looking to have other people curate shows and create a community atmosphere. Why is that the approach you took with this space?

I feel like the gallery system is often too focused on a specific gallerist's or curator's own vision. While I think it is important to develop an aesthetic to the gallery, bringing in other artists and curators opens an opportunity to create a dialogue with a broader context of the art community. Part of my mission is really to engage the community here. By doing that I'm going to sort of remove myself. I'd sort of like this space to function as its own living organism that can function outside of me and my vision.

What spaces around the city do you feel are operating in the same format with the same mission?

There aren't a lot of smaller nonprofits left. When I was in school I'd always check out Heaven. And Beacon Street is one of the last remaining smaller nonprofits. I always check out Smart Museum and Hyde Park Art Center.

Those sized institutions are what I may aspire to be. I feel like what I'm aspiring to do here may be filling a void. Chicago has a precarious position in the commercial art realm. I don't feel like people are really collecting here or that this is a destination for contemporary art. There's an energy of a grassroots movement here that could really develop into something bigger. I like the idea of the art scene taking care of itself. If more and more spaces like this develop, I feel like we may bring some sort of attention back to Chicago as part of the contemporary art discourse.