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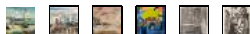
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Art & Design



Ox-Bow incidents

Two shows celebrate the centennial of a school that still shapes Chicago art. *By Lauren Weinberg*



Edgar Rupprecht, Untitled (Saugatuck), 1940s.

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"The landscape is incredibly beautiful. There are lots of vantages. You can paint the water. It's also kind of secluded, so you can have life-painting classes going on and you're not going to have a community that's freaked out by having naked women standing around."

John Corbett, the codirector of Corbett vs. Dempsey Gallery, is explaining why Frederick Fursman and Walter Marshall Clute created a summer art school on an isolated spot on the Kalamazoo River. In 1910, the two School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) professors founded the school near Saugatuck, Michigan. Now known as Ox-Bow and officially affiliated with SAIC, the school celebrates its 100th birthday this year.

During the past century, several Chicago Imagists passed through Ox-Bow. So did other SAIC alumni such as Joan Mitchell and LeRoy Neiman—whose foundation announced a \$1 million donation to Ox-Bow on July 13. While the school serves art students of all ages from across the U.S., its largest contingent still comes from SAIC, which offers credit for classes there. Its ties to the Chicago art world are as strong as ever: This summer's instructors and visiting artists include locals Michelle Grabner, chair of SAIC's painting department; Theaster Gates, whose solo show at the Milwaukee Art Museum ends Sunday 1; and Renaissance Society associate curator Hamza Walker.

Through August 21, Corbett vs. Dempsey commemorates Ox-Bow's centennial by exhibiting the works of Fursman, Christina Ramberg, Ellen Lanyon and other artists who've studied, taught or had residencies there, mostly during the school's first 50 years. (Corbett has taught "on and off" at Ox-Bow for a decade.) Another Wicker Park gallery, Roots & Culture, highlights contemporary Ox-Bow artists including Mike Andrews, Aspen Mays and Melanie Schiff through Saturday 31. (Roots & Culture's founder and director, Eric May, is Ox-Bow's head chef.)

At Corbett vs. Dempsey, a young Claes Oldenburg is represented by a seamy lithograph that evokes Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec rather than his signature Pop sculptures. But most pieces in the show depict Ox-Bow's woods, dunes or namesake lagoon, or play up Saugatuck's small-town charm. Not all of the works at Roots & Culture engage the school's setting as directly, but former Ox-Bow director Betsy Rupprecht's painting *Sand Dunes at Ox-Bow* (2004) and Mays's Untitled (*Fireflies inside body of my camera 8:37–8:39pm, June 26, 2008*)—a photo of brilliant yellow-green light—suggest nature keeps inspiring some visitors.

Born in 1932, Rupprecht spent many childhood summers at Ox-Bow, where her parents Edgar Rupprecht and Isobel Steele MacKinnon (whose paintings appear at Corbett vs. Dempsey) met in 1920. The artist, who's taught at SAIC for 50 years, says she loved attending Ox-Bow as a scholarship student, funding her classes through "minimal work" making beds, washing dishes and sweeping sand out of the school's cabins and studios—which, she assures us, still look more or less the same. "We all called each other by our first names," Rupprecht recalls. "Nobody cared whether you were 16 or 60...which was big in the '50s. No formality."

Ox-Bow's camaraderie remains a large part of its appeal, as communal meals in the former inn at the heart of campus, musical performances and 24-hour studio access foster conversations and collaborations. (Andrews, Ox-Bow's academic director, says the school's tiny winter session is a special bonding experience.) Mays, who attended Ox-Bow as both an M.F.A. student and a resident artist, tells us the quiet and solitude she found there were equally critical to developing new ideas: "It was great to have access to that sort of dialogue whenever you wanted it, but you could also shut it all out."

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