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Art scene flourishes anew

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C. Daniel Newberry's works line a wall at Jackson Artworks. The 44-inch-tall aluminum figures are derived from traditional West African sculpture but have a modern Western look.

The call woke sculptor C. Daniel Newberry from a sound sleep at around 5 in the morning.

The director of Jackson Artworks had terrible news. A 22-by-20-foot chunk of ceiling at the gallery had collapsed, destroying all of Newberry's artwork.

"I was depressed for a long time after that disaster," said Newberry of the traumatic May 6, 2007, event. "I lost everything and had to start all over."

Newberry is back this week with his first exhibit at Jackson since the roof collapse. His show, "Observations at a Distance," features more than a dozen new sculptures inspired by West African art.

The exhibit heralds Newberry's return. It also coincides with a recent flourishing of art galleries in the Old Market.

Jackson, at 1108 Jackson St., reopened last year with a new look and a new mission. It had been a working studio where about a dozen or so artists made and exhibited their work. Now it's a showroom for adventurous local and regional exhibitions.

In the past few months, two other popular galleries, Pulp and Glass Harmony, have moved to the Old Market.

Along with such neighborhood fixtures as Jackson, Artist Cooperative Gallery, White Crane Gallery, Old Market Artists Gallery and Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, the new galleries have begun to make the Old Market seem like a real art gallery district.

"We've never had a real, concentrated art gallery district in Omaha before," said Ree Kaneko, a longtime Old Market artist and wife of famed Omaha ceramist Jun Kaneko. "But we're sure seeing signs of that now. Something is happening."

The recent blossoming of galleries in Old Market is partly the result of practical concerns.

Pulp, now at 1026 Howard St., moved from Benson last spring because owner Brigitte McQueen wanted to increase daytime foot traffic. Glass Harmony, which had its first open house in the Old Market last week, moved from midtown in May for much the same reason.

The surge of art galleries in Omaha's old warehouse district also reflects a national trend, said Richard Florida, author of the bestselling book "The Rise of the Creative Class" and a renowned expert on urban renewal and the arts. Cities such as Philadelphia, Washington, Denver and Portland have also transformed warehouse districts into vibrant centers for the arts.

"The arts are critical to quality of place," said Florida, director of the University of Toronto's Martin Prosperity Institute, in an interview via e-mail.

James and Katherine Moser had quality of life in mind when they purchased the building that became Jackson Artworks in 1991. At the time, the Mosers, who live in a townhouse on Jackson Street, were concerned about proposed plans for the building.

"There was talk of it becoming a disco," said Newberry. "The Mosers couldn't bear the thought of it, especially since they lived on Jackson Street."

Jackson Artworks opened in 1992 as a studio space. Newberry was one of the first artists to take up residence, setting up a studio to sculpt wood. Over time, the gallery also began showing the work of local artists and occasionally hosted touring shows.

On the evening of Saturday, May 5, 2007, the Mosers had an open house for a new show at Jackson called "Journeys 4." The exhibit featured their artwork and that of Jim Butkus, Rebecca Hermann, Karen Zuegner and Kris Waldher. Those artists often travel together and then create artwork about their trip — hence the title "Journeys 4."

There had been record rainfall in Omaha that Saturday. The rain, coupled with a clogged drain on the roof, opened a hole in Jackson's ceiling sometime after midnight on May 6. The hole opened directly above Newberry's studio, crushing and drenching his work. He was the only artist at the studio to lose everything.

For the 57-year-old Newberry, the loss of the studio and about 30 works of art was devastating.

Born in Pascagoula, Miss., in 1950, Newberry moved to Omaha in 1968 and, with the exception of a three-year stint in the Marines during Vietnam, has lived here since. Mostly he has worked in construction. But sculpting was always his passion, and as an adult he returned to school, graduating summa cum laude at the age of 52 with a fine arts degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

The soft-spoken Newberry, who sports a thick, salt-and-pepper beard, had primarily worked with wood prior to the Jackson flood. The post-diluvian Newberry felt compelled to change course.

He became interested in aluminum casting. With help from two Hot Shops artists — Les Bruning, an expert in bronze casting, and Michael Godek, a metal sculptor — Newberry began work on his magnum opus.

The 44-inch-tall aluminum figures in "Observations at a Distance" are derived from traditional West African sculpture. Newberry, however, gives his sculptures — all female figures with outstretched arms and fused legs — a modern Western look. It's the sort of chic, cutting-edge style that has become a signature of Jackson and other Old Market galleries.

Christina Narwicz, who took over as director of Jackson when it reopened, said that kind of art is in line with Jackson's new mission.

"Jim and Kat Moser wanted a new energy to go with the gallery's new renovated look," she said.

Cary Tobin, who works at Omaha's Middle School Learning Center Initiative, frequently visits the Old Market galleries. She said the work she's seen at Jackson and Pulp fills a much-needed niche.

"We're a growing city and need places to see challenging, intelligent, cutting-edge art," she said.

Pulp's current show, "Flower Power: New Work by Wanda Ewing," fits that bill.

Ewing, an assistant professor at UNO, has created a series of images of African-American women. Some wearing Caucasian hairstyles are depicted in sensuous hip-hop dance poses. Others boasting ample Afros are posed in a much less suggestive manner. They are beautiful works that question our notions of race and sexuality.

McQueen founded Pulp in Benson two years ago as a combination gallery and specialty paper store. McQueen, however, was bursting at the seams to exhibit works like Ewing's.

"There's a real audience for that in Old Market," she said.

Corey Broman, who opened Glass Harmony Gallery with friend and painter Joe Liebenritt in midtown in 2007, wasn't looking to be cutting-edge with his move, though his sculpted blown glass is eye-popping. He just wanted more attention.

"We weren't getting random visitors in midtown," said Broman, whose gallery now is next to Jackson Artworks. "You had to know exactly where we were to find us."

Glass Harmony's first Old Market show, "New Creations, New Location," opened last week featuring the work of Broman, Liebenritt, photographer Rebecca Liebenritt and painter Mike Loftus.

Broman's sculpted glass often boasts Native American themes — his amazing set of native tom-toms look like wood and animal hide but are, in fact, glass. Liebenritt's paintings are colorful and fun — his Carmen Miranda painting is bathed in a rainbow of bright hues. And his wife Rebecca's photographs are expertly framed snapshots of European landmarks.

Loftus' paintings show demonic figures smoking, drinking and generally whooping it up while wearing priestly collars.

"Old Market has been crying out for this kind of art," Loftus said.

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