

BRIDGEPORT, CONNECTICUT

“THE WORLD OF REALITY HAS ITS LIMITS; THE WORLD OF IMAGINATION IS BOUNDLESS.” — JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU

What’s going on in Bridgeport? I have to be honest — last year when I was first invited to attend an art opening in Bridgeport, Connecticut, I was surprised and a bit skeptical. Bridgeport has long had a reputation as a dead or dying manufacturing city with a high crime rate, abandoned and broken buildings and not much else. The last thing I expected was to be invited to a fine art opening in that very city and ... there was quite a hullabaloo going on about it in Connecticut art circles.

Bridgeport gets its fair share of dirt, for sure, and just recently the city was dissed on Fox’s popular series, “Family Guy.” This created quite an outrage among the city’s very loyal residents, and frankly they would be within their rights to speak out. Due to huge community spirit, a love of art and a lot of hard work, the city is reinventing itself as one of Connecticut’s hottest art centers.

Now, allow me to say, that first opening I attended at Eileen Walsh’s Gallery at Black Rock was one of the most thoughtful and well put-together art openings I have attended. Walsh enjoys exhibiting cutting-edge art, the likes of which

is often not credited to the state of Connecticut. In addition to a great night out, I experienced no problems with parking or with any type of harassment. Since that time I have happily attended four or five other exhibitions and felt quite safe and protected during all my visits. The art is diverse, the openings exciting and the community most welcoming. Walsh closed the Gallery at Black Rock at the end of 2010, moving to a new home in a restored 19th century factory building at 305 Knowlton Street she calls The Gallery 305K.

So, how exactly does a city reinvent itself as one of Connecticut’s leading art centers? Walsh credits the start of the excitement to Keith Rodgerson and his partner Gregg Iwaszkiewicz, who first developed some avant-garde events at the NEST and then in other public spaces around the city. “People loved these events and these two guys really helped set the stage for the momentum that was to come,” explained Walsh. “It’s wonderful that we now have a variety of dialogs going on in Bridgeport. Even a year ago, we couldn’t imagine having the types of conversations and connections that are being made in the art community today.”

“I think a lot of the energy here comes from the artists and residents,” Rodgerson said. “They see a blank canvas and want to be a part of building



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Grand opening of the Center for Public Art and Design in November 2010 (photograph by Rob Frawley).

the community. They almost have a war-like mentality toward this goal.”

Aided by the newly established Bridgeport Arts and Cultural Council, the city now has support to build and promote its cultural events and arts agenda. Like any shoreline city, Bridgeport would like to welcome tourists, and to this end, a good deal of renovation has taken place all around the city. The Council has made its home in the magnificent historic Arcade Mall, an 1889 Gothic Revival, iron-and-glass structure that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and recently celebrated its opening in November 2010 with



City Lights Gallery.

the very successful “Bridgeport Art Trail.” The city is now home to over 19 art venues as new galleries and studios have found homes in amazing open industrial spaces with lighting and architecture that any artist, designer or art lover would appreciate.

In addition to the many galleries and artist studios in the city, Bridgeport also lays claim to Housatonic Community College which, unbeknownst to many, contains a treasure trove of fine art. “You can walk down the hallways of this community college and see amazing examples of museum quality art hanging on the walls. It’s really just extraordinary and no one really knows what a little gem this place is,” Walsh said. The Community College shares art with the Housatonic Museum of Art, which boasts that it has “one of the most

significant collections of any two-year college in the country” and includes works by master artists such as Rodin, Picasso, Matisse, Miro, Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein, Renoir, Klimt, Noguchi and Chagall. Who would have thought? In fact, Bridgeport is also the home of several other noteworthy institutions such as the Barnum Museum, Discovery Museum and the Beardsley Zoo.

The American Fabrics Building, newly renovated at 1069 Connecticut Avenue, Bldg. #4, offers a thriving and diverse art and artisan space. There you will find paintings, sculpture, photography, textiles, mixed media and ceramics. Additionally, some of the artists here work in unique niches, including Neil Pabian, who creates custom writing instruments and Emily Larned, who uses vintage letterpress for printing.

Given its location, artists living and exhibiting in Bridgeport are also well acquainted with the goings-on of its big city neighbor, Manhattan. New York City’s Umbrella Arts owner, Margaret Bodell, has now made Bridgeport an entry in her stable with the recent opening of her Center for Public Art and Design.

I encourage you to visit the Bridgeport Art Trail. Highlights are Read’s Artspace, American Fabrics Arts Building, Gallery 305K, The Bridgeport Arts and Cultural Council (offering four exhibitions a year), Gallery 999, City Lights Gallery, Playhouse on the Green, Housatonic Museum of Art and of course, the Center for Public Art and Design.

For more information visit bridgeportarts.org.

Lisa Mikulski

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