

To Have And Have Not

To Have

MIKE COOPER'S MURAL AT SIXTH Avenue and Church Street is finished, and thus another "Urban Icon" — Richard Haas' term — has been added to the Nashville cityscape. Cooper has absorbed and re-invented the street corner, communicating an artist's vision of a Downtown moment's "was," "is" and "will be." In this way, he has created a creative flow-chart analysis of the dynamics of the Nashville art scene.

Incorporating as compositional elements the pre-existing architectural features of the wall upon which the mural is painted, Cooper signifies the "was" of the surface of his "canvas." The "is" involves the artist's depicting an imaginary instant in the creation of the mural, which deconstructs the mural-making process for the viewer. Pieces of the "puzzle," or composition, are being hauled up, mulled over and finally placed where they belong. Everybody, even the dog who's fetching a puzzle piece, is joining in the work/play — everybody, that is, except the viewer, who gets to kick back on a bench and watch. A man leaning out one of the windows directs us to the Downtown Main Library — the "will be" of the mural — which is presently under construction across the street. The centerpiece of the mural is a big faux picture window reflecting the library view one will have from the mural wall once the building is completed.

This project is another example of how the culture-conscious segment of the business community is stepping forward in the absence of a percent-for-the-arts program to instigate worthy creative endeavors. Similarly motivated ventures include temporary lobby exhibits like those at the American Center (assisted by Atlanta-based Barkin-Leeds and now showing Melissa Hefferlin and Daud Alkhriev) and Duke Realty (coordinated by the Arts Company and now showing Paul Harmon and John Guidon) in Brentwood. Also in Brentwood, PBI sets an example of higher-level commitment for a culture-conscious business, with impressive signature panels by Zeitgeist artist Richard Painter, commissioned specifically for PBI's public entrance.

Businesses are also recognizing the value of sponsoring visual arts events and projects. AGFA and the Computer Exchange (which set up a multimedia display for the artist's CD-ROM at the opening) sponsored Diane Barrie's exhibit at Destination Gallery (covered in last week's column). The success of the 5th AOTA project depends on just this sort of enlightened arts sponsorship.

However, the business community — limited as it is by perceived parameters of "taste" and an atmosphere of knee-jerk litigation over First Amendment issues — can only go



so far in fostering a healthy art scene here. This is why the artist's gallery and alternative exhibition space are vital to the health of Nashville's art scene.

To Have Not

Two such spaces had their inaugural openings in the past month: Ruby Green and the Fugitive Art Center (great name!) at 400 Houston Street. When artists get together for this sort of enterprise, the process is often as interesting as the product, usually involving brutal late-night renovation and installation sessions, high emotions, blowout openings — and short organizational life spans. These symptoms of the phenomenon have little relation to the value such endeavors have for the scene. "Happenings" and artist collaborations historically have proven instrumental in the introduction of important artists, artistic innovation and subject matter too "hot" for institutional commerce-rooted venues.

Ruby Green (514 Fifth Avenue N.) opened March 19 with an exhibition of Pidge Cash's compelling exhibition "Metalwoven Metaphors." If you visited the space when it was Studio 514, you'll be blown away by the transformation that has taken place since partners Chris Campbell and husband Chris Dugger took over. Campbell lived and worked at Paolo Saleri's "City of the Future" in Arizona, and is applying the cool, weird architect's notion of multi-purpose buildings to Ruby Green. To that end, workshops, "slide days" and figure-drawing sessions are scheduled to start in April in the utile section of the space.

Cash's interestingly lit fiber sculptures are beautifully presented in Ruby Green's clean, elegantly accoutered gallery and foyer. The artist pushes the limits of weaving as a medium, dancing with both 2-D and 3-D contemporary aesthetics, installation concerns and light and shadow as presentation elements. To her credit, Cash doesn't abandon the roots of her craft, including a metal-woven basket and other nods to the tradition in the 13-piece show. The artist's work revisits an interesting 30-year-old question regarding the extent to which a given medium (in this case, fiber) is versatile enough to satisfy expressive criteria typically reserved for painting and sculpture, the Western tradition's hallowed artistic vehicles. Cash's artwork, with its subtle use of color, formal articulation and thematic resonance, reinforces fiber art's resilience as an artist's tool, despite its relatively recent addition to the toolbox.

The Fugitive Art Center officially opened March 27 with a group show of local artists, many of whom have exhibited prodigiously for years in Nashville and have been heavily involved in Untitled and other groups and projects. The reception was a *tres* edgy event, notice for which was mostly spread by word of mouth. Works by Gadsby Creson, Tim Murphy, David Glick, Urchard Mitchell, Marty Spence, Dallas Moore, Megan Walborn, Lain York, Brian Hunter and Greg Pond were hung on freshly installed and painted drywall and cogently situated around

the gallery. The factory floors in the Chestnut art space are raw, clamp lights provide illumination and the overall impression is one of sophisticated, grungy cool.

Pond says of the FAC, "We're creating an exhibition space dedicated to the exploration of edgy, progressive contemporary art and the presentation thereof." Pond, York and Hunter comprise the nucleus of FAC, though on several visits prior to the reception, I saw most of the members of the show contributing time, energy and sweat to the project.

My favorites in the show (which closed shortly after the event) included Glick's morphing nude, Pond's massive sculptural centerpiece (like a leather-wrapped tusk eight feet long underscored by a sheath of animal hair) and Urchard's savage exploration of the '60s cultural legacy. For the most part, the rest of the work was consistently solid.

The next show at FAC, opening April 3 and titled "Flesh," will feature sculpture and installation by Terry Glispin. The artist "employs materials such as cast rubber vinyl and iron, addressing issues of sex and identity," according to Pond. It should be a shocker, and not something you're likely to see in a Nashville office building (call 479-3850 for info).

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It's artists and artists' venues like these that force established museums and galleries to refocus on what's current. Some of Nashville's institutions, like the Parthenon and Cheekwood, are pushing forward progressively with an exhibition agenda that embraces the new, while maintaining a foundation in the traditional. The Frist Museum and the Downtown Library projects are inci-

dentally pressurizing the scene, as the area's other institutions develop strategies to maintain their relevance. All of us Nashvillians, artists or no, are already benefiting from the momentum that's developing around the opening of the new facilities. But the real growth will occur with the broadening of the foundation for artistic achievement in the city subsequent to their completion.

With this in mind, I attended the "Final Stroke" ceremony (March 30) and watched as several businessmen put the finishing touches on Mike Cooper's fanciful mural. In the crowd of proud suit-wearing supporters of public visual art were familiar faces (Tom Turk, Sandra Duncan and Sara Miller) from the Metro Arts Commission and Nashville Downtown Partnership. Gazing up at the mural, reveling in the din of construction behind me, it hit me: Mike had precisely captured in his big painting the status quo of the Nashville art scene.

Here's how I "read" it: High above us are the artists and arts advocates, working feverishly at their task, simultaneously attempting to piece together a sense of their own value, suspended from above, unsupported from below. The Main Library, reflected in the window but not yet there, represents the institutional foundation for the city, invaluable for Nashville's creating a positive cultural identity of itself. And in the open space between, signified by the faux bricks, are the contributions of the business community, without whom meaningful growth is not possible. Most of Nashville is sitting on benches watching the whole thing go down. I haven't figured out who the dog is, yet. If you have any ideas, let me know. 