

Kickstart art

Galleries band together

By GREG COOK | July 23, 2008

After a brutal spring in which each week seemed to bring the depressing news of another Boston art outlet shuttering, a new consortium of galleries announced its formation with the launch of a Web site this past week. It was a quiet but clear signal of an effort to jumpstart the local scene.

The straightforwardly named Boston Contemporary Group aims “to support an environment in Boston for critically relevant contemporary art.” Just what that means is under discussion, but the group hopes to cultivate new clients, generate excitement about art, spur dialogue, and bring in much-needed revenue.

“We’re trying as much as possible to build a contemporary art scene in Boston,” says Russell LaMontagne of LaMontagne Gallery. He dreamed up the idea a couple months ago, and enlisted Steve Zevitas of Steven Zevitas/OSP Gallery and Camilo Alvarez of Samson Projects as co-founders. The final charter member is the not-quite-year-old Proof Gallery.

The group is so new that its members haven’t even gotten together to vet ideas yet, but proposals include joint advertising, organizing talks and studio tours, sponsoring public art, and giving out awards. Its first baby step is bostoncontemporary.org, a centralized Web site that members hope will become a hub for the arts in the Hub. The site will not only publicize the group’s own projects but also offer information about other notable area exhibits.

It is hoped that the site will manifest the foundation of a vision for the city’s art that LaMontagne is just beginning to articulate — something younger, fresher, more challenging, more conceptually oriented. Julia Hechtman, who arrived from Chicago a year ago to co-found Proof, notes that a lack of do-it-yourself spirit in Boston has people less engaged, but says, “I have a feeling that this community is really ripe for something new and something exciting.”

One might say that the founders are young (none older than 40), emerging leaders of the city’s art scene. But in fact they’ve already emerged as significant players: Alvarez through his respected four-year-old gallery; LaMontagne for formerly being co-owner of hotshot LFL Gallery in New York (he was one of the L’s) and then opening up his own Boston gallery in spring 2007; and Zevitas for his 15-year-old journal *New American Paintings* and his seven-year-old gallery, which he’s in the process of moving from a third-floor space inside 450 Harrison Avenue to a more prominent storefront space downstairs. The fact that 10 galleries have recently closed or reduced operations, at least temporarily, has only increased their stature.

Boston Contemporary Group could be seen as a younger rival to the Boston Art Dealers Association, which was formed in 1989, but which has been quiet in recent years. The shakeup has left at least seven of the latter group’s 24 members (not all of them galleries) closed, in a state of reorganization, or without a space.

With any luck, Boston Contemporary could expand the local market for art. LaMontagne argues that the funds local museums have been able to raise for building projects suggests a significant untapped clientele for contemporary art here. Local dealers grumble that Boston collectors don’t shop locally, instead buying in New York or at art fairs. “It’s our job to give them something to look at,” says LaMontagne. “We have to do something.”

