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81° | A Few Clouds

DAILY MEMO: ART:

On a shoestring, arts group strives to stay relevant

The Contemporary Arts Center, a fixture of the local scene for years, looks to remain on vanguard



PUBLICITY PHOTO

“Blanket” exhibit by Danielle Kelly on display at the Contemporary Arts Center.

By Kristen Peterson

Wed, Oct 28, 2009 (2 a.m.)

The current exhibit at the downtown Contemporary Arts Center is not immediately accessible. It’s likely to confuse the general public on first impression. Some won’t get it. Some will want to know more. Some might feel awkward in its presence.

For that, the exhibit — titled “Blanket” — is the quintessential CAC show: experimental and contemporary, unusual and questioning. The show unites Las Vegas artist Danielle Kelly with Portland dancer Noelle Stiles. It exists in three parts — the original installation, composed of hanging stuffed sculptures made by Kelly; a performance in which Stiles moves through that space; and the subsequent exhibit that exists after Stiles’ performance has manipulated the work.

The stuffed sculptures — adorned, yellow, patterned, alone and clustered — leave you examining a visually uncommon situation.

Similar to the CAC’s “metasonic,” an abstract visual and sound installation, “Blanket” brings the viewer into unfamiliar territory.

Surprisingly, this member-based, cash-strapped, mostly volunteer nonprofit organization has survived 20 years in Las Vegas, where studio and commercial galleries appear and then disappear within months. Its duration has been a source of pride for all involved, even though the organization fluctuates wildly depending on who is running the show. There have been varied incarnations and hideously low points, but the center has been a consistent hub in a fragmented and transient community.

To stay on course, the board is carefully selecting its new director, using funding from a National Endowment for the Arts grant. The group has no money, and board President David Sanchez Burr has been streamlining operations, mainly its database, and assessing how the organization can remain faithful to its mission of fostering contemporary and innovative works.

“We want people who are expanding the vocabulary of contemporary and experimental art,” he says. “The highest goal in art is to innovate, to work off and straddle boundaries of known and unknown.”

That format is vital to a community that routinely loses interesting people who move away because of the city’s limited opportunities, he says.

“People don’t get a lot of love here. Artists don’t get a lot of love here,” Sanchez Burr says. “It needs a center. We want to be that center. It’s what we’ve got. It could do so much.”

He cites model organizations in San Francisco, Grand Rapids, Mich., and Sante Fe, N.M. “They’ve figured out ways to sustain themselves and they continue to make themselves relevant in the cities they live in and support the arts.”

For the Contemporary Arts Center to stay relevant within the community, Sanchez Burr says, it has been taken seriously by maintaining a high level of programming and a stable organization and by re-establishing itself with its members, sponsors and benefactors, some of whom the group had lost track of. The group is currently at 200 members (it has been at more 600) and relies heavily on its largest benefactor, Wes Myles, owner of the Arts Factory and CAC board member, who provides the group's space at a significantly reduced cost.

"We want to get people back in the fold again," Sanchez Burr says. "My goal is that we'd have 1,000 members."

Meanwhile, he says, it looks to hire a director as soon as next month, someone who has experience with what contemporary art is in today's world. The group has an exhibition committee that determines the exhibits.

Recent exhibits and events have included "Off the Strip: Performance and Video Event," which brought videos and artists from other cities for presentations at various downtown locations. The group partnered with Goldwell Open Air Museum, adjacent to the ghost town of Rhyolite, a project that also merged Las Vegas artists with artists from other cities, and organized the Christoph Draeger video and lecture event, which had been curated by Alise Uptis of the Las Vegas Art Museum before the museum folded. It also hosts monthly readings by UNLV graduate students and faculty in the arts.

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