

CURATING CONSISTANCY

AFTER PANDEMIC CLOSURES, ART IS RETURNING TO FILL NEW GALLERIES

BY EMILY COX

Don't call it a comeback, but after a pandemic that has been going on for what feels like 20 years—and a rash of art space closures before that—it's refreshing to report that four new artist-run galleries have opened in Kansas City this year.

The physical spaces and philosophies behind Troost Gardens, Lodger, Sapien Gallery, and The Ekru Project are diverse. But they are all run by artists who are driven by a desire to see the arts and artists thrive in our city.

This brings us to the heart of the matter, the question that each artist space must continue to ask itself: How can Kansas City have a thriving, independent art scene, when the community's spaces are so tenuous, and the people running them don't have the material resources they need to sustain themselves and bring visions to life?

RJ Junger completed their degree at Kansas City Art Institute in the cursed semester of spring 2020. When they were searching for a studio after graduation, a friend tipped them off to the little-known Erie Building, north of the river.

As they toured the studio spaces converted from old offices, they noticed one in the middle that wouldn't necessarily be a good studio. But, they decided the space was perfect for a gallery project.

"I left and I was at Harry's Bar & Tables with my friend Scout in the beginning of summer, and was talking about how it would be so cool to be able to do what I'm passionate about—to really have an inquiry and try to answer these questions about showing work and making work and cataloguing Kansas City," says Junger. "My friend Scout was like, 'Okay then why don't you just do it?'"

So Junger did. They had seen many artist studios and DIY spaces dry up during their junior year, and had been grappling with the questions posed by art school.

"What does it mean to make work? What are people thinking about the role of art right now? And instead of just wondering about [these questions], and getting frustrated, really attacking it in multiple forms and ways," Junger says.

They are particularly interested in curating group shows, which Junger sees as one answer to what's missing in the city right now.

Solo shows may reach that artist's immediate circle. They may be an opportunity

to express what they want to say. But Junger is interested in creating conversations between artists.

"When I was really thinking about it," they continue, "I was like we really need to be connecting national and international artists with really great artists in Kansas City and have them be in the same conversation."

Before the gallery opened its first show in July, Junger got involved with a curator roundtable run by Kevin Umaña and Emily Reinhardt of The Ekru Project. Brandon Forrest Frederick, an artist and curator who was leaving town for grad school, asked Junger if they wanted all his leftover gear from running his now-closed space, Open House.

"It was amazing to have so much community support in the beginning," says Junger. Those resources of lights and paint and moral support eased the obstacles of launching a space.

That curator roundtable-turned-support group facilitated by The Ekru Project is integral to their efforts to support the art scene in Kansas City.

"We share contacts, we share resources, we pump each other up. We're just that group you can count on for whatever you need," says Reinhardt. "It's been a really exciting opportunity to meet a lot of people, and to realize that these other artist-run galleries and organizations are facing the same struggles we are."

One of the motivations behind their



Pivot @ Beco 2. L to R Fredy Gabuarrdy, Francisco Gabuarry. COURTESY LODGER



Top: The "Mazes, Microcosm, Mitosis" installation in The Ekru Project. Above Left: Emily Reinhardt of The Ekru Project. Above Right: Kevin Umaña of The Ekru Project. ALEX SKORIJA

roundtable is to improve the arts community here.

"How do we make Kansas City a city that artists want to plant roots and stay? There's no MFA program here, there's no secondary step for an art student to continue their career and plant themselves here," says Reinhardt. "We want to create the space and the type of community with opportunities for people to say, 'Kansas City is where I want to build my art career.'"

Umaña poses a similar question: "How do we encourage people to come here and stay here and give to the community, rather than take?" Umaña himself is a New York City transplant now committed to Kansas City.

Ekru began as an online curation project when Reinhardt and Umaña were in a long-distance relationship. The couple had been planning on Reinhardt moving to New York City to unite with Umaña there. But as for everyone, COVID-19 changed those plans. When the pandemic began, Umaña figured, "I'll hide out in Kansas City until this flu dies out. And then...I never left."

Reinhardt picks up the story, "Simultaneously with your decision to move here, this space became available. We had kind of started The Ekru Project when we were dating long distance as this online curatorial, just sharing artists and their work, and then when this space became available—well, the lights are here, there's walls, let's turn it into a real gallery. Everything has been very 'go with the flow.'"

The Ekru Project shares a brick Crossroads building with Duet, a shop run by Re-

inhardt and her business partner Sasha Santillan, as well as Reinhardt's ceramics studio housed in the back of the space. Umaña keeps a studio in the building basement.

A huge perk of the combined space is that it is more approachable and accessible than many small, separate galleries. They have open hours most days of the week. Those that come in to browse the shop can stumble upon the gallery and vice versa, in a symbiotic relationship.

"We have more gallery hours because we're always here," says Umaña. "My studio's in the basement, Emily's studio is here. Even when we're closed, if someone shows an interest in the window, we're like, 'Come on in!'"

While Reinhardt has been established in Kansas City for a decade with her ceramics business under the name The Object Enthusiast, Umaña isn't letting being new to Kansas City slow him down.

Facilitating the curator roundtable, meeting with city officials, attending panels—Umaña wants to do whatever he can to build up the Kansas City arts community.

"We need to support each other because there have been so many artist-run galleries that have closed in recent years," Umaña says. "I don't want that because I'm invested in the Kansas City art scene. Coming from New York, I want this art scene to succeed. It deserves some recognition on the map."

Reinhardt talks about how they want to both elevate local artists and bring artists from elsewhere into the conversation here.

"We want to support the local, under-

represented, emerging artists who deserve a space, but we also want to bring in some fresh air, some new work to Kansas City that doesn't get shown here," Reinhardt says. "Your peers and all the people you've met in larger cities, just like artists here, don't have places to show, and they also probably have never shown in the Midwest."

The Ekru Project's inaugural exhibition, *Equilibrium*, which opened in January 2021 featured artists from the Midwest, both coasts, Mexico, and Canada. After the sticker shock of shipping all that art back to the artists, they pivoted and followed *Equilibrium* up with shows featuring only local artists.

Ekru is facing the same questions of sustainability as every artist-run, nonprofit, or DIY gallery.

"You're on a hamster wheel all the time," says Reinhardt, "trying to make enough to pay for the space and to pay for the shipping [for artworks]. That doesn't include us in there anywhere, that's just keeping the lights on."

Umaña and Reinhardt do not make a salary from running the gallery. Instead, they are funding it out of their own pocket.

"It feels like we're doing amazing work and cultivating this sort of art scene, but in another way, how do we keep going without going broke?" Umaña says. "We're working really hard in finding those answers."

"We're not trying to get rich, we're just trying to keep art alive in Kansas City," Reinhardt adds.

Without proper funding, their visions for the space sometimes have to be scaled down.

"We've had to hold back on what kind of shows we want to go towards because we can't afford those kinds of shows," says Umaña.

Junger at Sapien echoed those limitations. Junger pays the gallery's \$200 per month rent out of their own pocket. Other gallery needs are self-funded or sourced from friends.

"Every time there's an opening, people talk about, 'What's the next thing you want to do?'" Junger would like to put a big vinyl statement on the wall for a show. But that's expensive.

"I'm not afforded that opportunity to really enhance and put this work on the national stage with other projects," says Junger.

Craig Auge, who runs Lodger, likewise operates on a shoestring.

"I am attempting to stage these exhibits at little to zero cost, and what expenses are incurred are out-of-pocket," says Auge. "But that is also part of the punk rock spirit of the thing. Use what you have and lean into the raw, unconventional nature of it. And constant awareness that all is temporary."

Ephemerality is part of what Lodger is.

"The whole idea behind the name 'Lodger' was that these pop-ups would show up like unexpected, yet welcome guests at

various sites. It might be domestic, it might be very public; it might stay for a few days, it might stay for a month."

Facing the closures of recent years, along with a desire to support local artists, and a need to have a curatorial outlet, that affinity for art in unexpected places birthed Lodger.

"I always loved what some people call a 'pop-up,' going back to when I was a teenager, staging exhibits and performances in vacant retail spaces, offices, and old dance studios," Auge says.

Lodger's current exhibit, *A Little Undefined*, is on display through Dec. 18 at Agnes Arts. Like the Erie Building up north, Agnes Arts is also a building of studios that features a gallery up front—the gallery in Agnes' case being Plug. But for the time being, a second gallery, Lodger, has appeared in the building.

After checking out what Plug has on display, you can wander down the corridor of artist studios, following signs pointing you towards Lodger, which inhabits two unfinished studios. In the center, a Bluetooth speaker plays jazz underneath a piece by text-based artist Donald Pruitt that says, "jazz is playing."

Stumbling upon this space evokes a sense of enchantment and sacredness. On the unpainted drywall and cinder block walls there's an esoteric mix of artworks, some lower and higher on the wall, drawing your eyes up and down, small pieces drawing you in close. You may find yourself with a light of curiosity in your belly; you may find yourself gasping at the whimsy, at the textures. This is the vital gift of artist-run spaces.

And it is the particular magic of Lodger.

"I want Lodger to show up in unexpected places," says Auge. Ultimately, I want to exhibit art where art (with a capital 'A')

might not usually exist. I would like viewers to have the feeling of stumbling upon something by accident, to feel perhaps confused, but enlivened by it."

Seeing expected art in expected places may do a disservice to both artist and viewer. Lodger challenges us to see art anew, to break out of the bounds of expectation. Compared to a typical, established white-walled gallery where everything feels overwrought and overdetermined, Lodger offers some breathing room for imaginative connections to bloom.

"I want to be a resource for underrepresented and emerging artists. I want to show artists who have passion and drive, and help them get to whatever their 'next level' is, regardless of experience, age, or connections to the 'scene,'" Auge says. "I want to mix up the conversation, to show seasoned artists next to artists just starting out, students alongside professors, MFAs with outsiders, neurodivergent artists, locals with internationals, all backgrounds, and stations."

He masterfully brings together unexpected artists to create a room full of treasures, all elevated in their relationship to one another. It is refreshing to see not just artists from Kansas City exhibited alongside artists from Luxembourg and Florida, but also to see neurodivergent artists exhibited alongside neuronormative ones.

"To me, creating an exhibit is often like creating one big collage, one poem, or story," Auge says. "I hope it can help artists see their work in a new, unexpected way, so they can move the work forward." The stories he is creating are transformational.

For some such as Auge, sustainability of Kansas City's art scene doesn't necessarily mean the longevity of any particular project, but an environment where these projects are given rich soil in which to grow.

"Whether Lodger, as a curatorial project, is still around in a few years...who

knows. But I hope that it inspires more artists to embrace the do-it-yourself mentality," says Auge. "There had been a lot of artist-run spaces in KC closing, and there was an opportunity. You sort of say to yourself, 'Who is going to do something next?' and then I started to think, 'It can be me.'"

All of these artists who have opened spaces this year had a similar reckoning: they wanted something to happen for Kansas City artists, and so they took that mantle and made it happen.

"Sometimes you have to make it happen yourself rather than wait for it to happen to you," says Umaña of The Ekru Project.

Like Sapien north of the river, Troost Gardens is outside of the familiar Crossroads scene. First Friday is showing itself to be less relevant for artist-run galleries and more of a tourist attraction for outsiders.

Even Ekru, which is in the Crossroads, has decided to forego First Friday openings—so the directors are free to attend other openings and connect what's happening in their neighborhood. Opening shows on other nights creates an environment where the attendees are actually deliberately there to see the show—rather than stumbling in on their way to a bar.

"We are sort of off the beaten path," says Sally Paul of Troost Gardens. "We are a destination gallery. I think there's an appetite for looking at art where people want to come out."

Sally Paul bought the Troost Gardens building with her partner (in both life and gallery), Billy Fowks. Fowks is from Kansas City and convinced Paul they should move here from New York in 2019. Paul worked in education at The Museum of Modern Art in NYC and planned to recreate a similar career in Kansas City.

But once here, she says, "I found I had more time to work on art and more headspace. We wanted to find a way to become



Above Left: "Sunshine and Shadow." Above Right: Sally Paul and Billy Fowks of Troost Gardens. © MAX ROHN

more involved in the art community here.” They bought their building and transformed it from a little warren of offices into an open, 1,500 square foot, white-walled gallery space.

“One of the things that I really love about Kansas City is it really feels like things are possible here,” says Paul. “New York, it can be very inspiring, but it can also be very challenging and expensive and dog-eat-dog and competitive. There’s something about Kansas City that just makes opportunities feel attainable.”

Similarly to all the other gallery directors we spoke to, Paul is explicitly interested in curating group exhibitions.

“That’s another sort of motivation we have, to bring in artists we know from other places, and have them in conversation with artists from Kansas City; to bring in new artists into the rich conversation that’s already happening here,” Paul says. “One of my inspirations is the Nerman Museum. I really love their program. They’ll choose such a great piece from somebody’s studio and then mix that with something that’s happening in Chelsea. I feel like it really elevates what’s happening in the Kansas City art scene in this interesting way. That’s sort of aspirational.”

While there has historically been a trend of talented people leaving Kansas City for bigger cities, there has been an exponential growth of the KC metro area according to the most recent U.S. census. In short, there might now be some flow back into our community. Two of the curators we spoke with, Sally Paul of Troost Gardens and Kevin Umaña of Ekru, are recent transplants from New York who have been invigorated by what they’ve found here.

“I think a lot of artists moved out of New York during the pandemic,” says Paul. “I think it’s really healthy for the country to have the spread of ideas and culture. And I think once artists get to cities where there’s a lower cost of living, they really appreciate some of the benefits of that.”

Paul continues, “I just think people have more time here. And one of the things that pays off is relationships with neighbors and community.”

That time is critical for art practice, too, says RJ Junger.

“Artists really need time and low rent affords that time. Cheap, accessible spaces afford you the space to think about your ideas.”

Ask any practicing artist in Kansas City what is needed to support a thriving art scene in Kansas City, and most of them will bring up the rising housing prices, and the need to keep space accessible—to both live and work in.

“People don’t want to pay \$900 per month rent. People want to live somewhere they can live,” says Junger.

Artists and gallery directors and cu-

rators put so much of their time, energy, and money into creating the Kansas City art scene. Without support from the beneficiaries—Kansas City locals—everyone will suffer.

“We’re putting so much of ourselves and so much of our own money into this,” says Junger. “And the city will benefit. The city will talk about how Kansas City is such an arts city and how that’s such a huge draw. They’ll just use us, and use our resources, and then increase our rent. And that’s just going to annihilate everything that’s going on. And that’s going to keep people from being able to start their own projects.”

Those artist contributions—not only their artworks, but the work they do in building and creating spaces and community—needs to be honored and materially supported.

And artists are working to get the city’s attention. At the end of November, six artist-run galleries—Beco, Curiouser, Ekru, Plug, Sapien, and Troost Gardens—collaborated on a one-day public art event in Gillham Park.

While in the process of planning the event, Umaña says, “We’ll try to invite directors of institutions and city people to come and see what is possible and to take these galleries seriously. We’re here to stay, we’re not going anywhere, and we’re going to try our best to continue this growth so it doesn’t fade out. I do feel like we’re on the precipice of a renaissance, and it does feel amazing to be a part of it.”

He continues, “We do want to stay here a long time. We want the city to survive. We’re encouraging people to come here and visit and fall in love with it.”

In 2019, there was anguish and grief, not only over losing spaces like The Drugstore, KunstraumKC, Front/Space, and Open House, but at the possibility of losing the very vitality that made Kansas City home for so many artists.

The quiet, tumultuous days of the pandemic had people moving across the country, assessing their priorities, and deciding: if not me, then who? If not now, then when?

The Kansas City art community isn’t just something that springs out of nothing. There are faces and names that are ensuring this vital part of our culture doesn’t wither and die, and instead, are planting seeds, watering and tending them, putting their blood sweat, and tears into that soil to grow things that will nourish the rest of us.

When you meet Auge, Junger, Paul, Reinhardt, and Umaña: thank them. Donate to their projects. Bring your friends. Be grateful for what we have now, and ask yourself what *you* can do to make Kansas City better for art and those who create it.

When you find yourself thinking, ‘I really wish we had _____ here!’ make it your responsibility to bring it into being. We’re ready for your visions to come true. **P**

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