



Houston Artletter

*Gone to Kansas City, part one*

by Titus O'Brien  
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I just got back from a weekend trip to Kansas City, Missouri. Regular readers and friends of [Siros](#) will already be aware of my connection to that lovely burg 500 miles up the I-35. I went to college there, and [KCAI was having an alumni weekend](#). I received a postcard a few weeks back saying that one of my two sculpture prof's, [Jim Leedy](#), is retiring after 45 years. So I thought I'd take this chance to get out of town, see the old man, some old friends, and some old haunts, take the temperature of a city seemingly on the rise, and check out the new building at the [Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art](#).

There were some workshops, and a sculpture symposium, hosted as part of the weekend schedule. The three panelists on the latter were all KCAI sculpture alums, one each from three different decades, all having studied with the dynamic duo of Leedy and longtime dept. chair [Dale Eldred](#): [Ming Fay](#) ('67), [Valerie Eickmeier](#) ('79), and [Shawn Brixey](#) ('85). There was supposed to be some theme around McLuhan's notion of the "global village", but luckily everyone just ignored that and gave standard artist talks.



Fay began with a brief autobio, showing pictures from his childhood in Shanghai and Hong Kong, and even the ship that he sailed to the states on at age 18. He came to study art, and eventually landed in KC, lured there after a meeting with Eldred and ceramics legend/longtime KCAI ceramics professor [Ken Ferguson](#). He's a wonderful artist, and an engaging human being. I was somewhat dismayed to note that there were only 2 or 3 students present for these talks. It should have been mandatory, and would have been "back in the day." Maybe this is part of why the sculpture department is currently a complete disaster, full of aimless messy piles of clueless, crafty, rusted junk. Dale, who used to roll through the department early mornings tossing anything that looked like clutter in the dumpster (including student projects), is surely rolling in his grave.



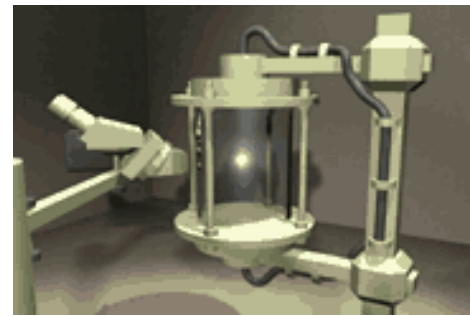


Eickmeier is dean at the [Herron School of Art](#), University of Indiana/Purdue. After running through some images of her poetic if fairly traditional sculptures, she mainly concentrated on her recent, few-years effort to get a spectacular new arts complex built for the college.

Next up was Shawn Brixey. He began with some great stories about studying with and working for Eldred, who was tragically killed in a studio accident in 1993. He was a larger than life figure, a powerhouse whose brashness and apparent arrogance was more than offset by his humor, talent, generous spirit, and unmistakable gifts as an educator. His legacy is legendary, and his students are a virtual who's who of sculpture of the last 40 years. I admire him more every year, as it grows ever more apparent how rare it is to pull off what he did as teacher, administrator, artist, and human. I know there are legions who feel this way, and miss him like I do.



Brixey is a natural heir to Eldred, a whirlwind of energy intent on marrying science and art, and totally committed to teaching. Maybe unconsciously modeling himself on Eldred, I occasionally had to shake my head, astonished at the assertions of his own singular unprecedented brilliance peppering his speech. However, like his mentor, he seems to have the goods to back it up, and he dazzled the crowd with discussions of his projects and the ideas fueling them. Completely bypassing the gallery racket, he independently raises millions of dollars and spends years developing some new scientific apparatus and technique in the service of art, poetics, and beauty, rather than the more typical war, industry, and commerce. It was inspiring, and at times confounding - as all good art should be. I walk away still digesting the possibilities, the ramifications, the grandness of his vision.



The alumni gathering coincided with "First Friday," a tradition there that goes back well before my time in KC, with all the galleries in town opening on the first Friday of the month. Let me say first that I think Kansas City is one of the most attractive cities in the country, designed with broad sinuous tree-lined boulevards snaking through limestone hills, and curious livable little neighborhoods scattered throughout town. Around every bend there is another sandstone art deco marvel, and as the tourist board likes to proclaim, there are "more fountains than Rome!"

I was reminded how stunningly friendly people are there, maybe a social extension of the warm earth energy that seems to emanate out of the ground itself, nurturing and supporting the city and community. There is a certain soulfulness, that drew me there in the first place and occasionally since, manifest in its musical and creative history and the open faces of many of its denizens. Conversely, there is also a lot of crime - I was held up at gunpoint twice living there, and personally knew many who were robbed, raped, and worse. The Art Institute 'hood, with its run down mansions and slew of beautiful naïve fearlessly stoned art students, was just like shooting fish in a barrel for the city's creeps and criminals.

That soulful nourishing vibe also has its traps. I think a lot of people go to school there and never get out. This is an absolute boon for the city, as many more or less abandon art and instead open the best restaurants, organic co-ops, French bakeries, coffeeshops, health food cafes, lingerie boutiques, become contractors, what have you. Many of them also open hole-in-the-wall art galleries, and First Friday gave me a chance to peek into many.

Kansas City suffers from problems peculiarly inverse of Dallas'; our circus-mirror Bizarro reflection. They have the school Dallas needs to matter, drawing talent and keeping it around, with the community to foster a real scene. They have the grass roots energy, so fitful and dispersed here, and a sense of churning excitement about the place. These nights of gallery openings draw thousands of people into the burgeoning [Crossroads district](#) , everybody wandering around and having a big ol' street party scattered for miles



around. DJ's were spinning music on the street; a pimped-out car with bumping bass was serving espresso out of the trunk; there was a line out the door of the artisanal chocolate shop for \$6 cups of hot chocolate (worth every penny); and the gourmet pizza joint was packed. Gangs of pegged jean, shaggy-bearded, asymmetrically hair-styled youths cruised around on vintage ten-speeds with most gears and the brakes removed (the new fad.) And last but not least, there were galleries piled on galleries, mostly full of negligible backwards regional hoo-ha.

If Dallas has all these sharp white walled galleries opening, importing talent in hopes of capturing the attention of bourgeois sometime collectors, resident artists often just seem to be biding their time till they break through and can move to a coast. Kansas City on the other hand has militias of artists just trying to keep the art school party rolling as long as possible, seemingly with nary a glance beyond the city line. The galleries tend to be in amazing old structures, and to also be dilapidated artist run labors of love. I talked to some really cool hip kids who've started a great little space, and who graduated recently with art history degrees. A brief chat about the work in their own show revealed that they had never heard of Donald Judd, Michael Heizer, Takashi Murakami, or Joseph Cornell. Ironically, in the museum across from the school, affectionately just called the Nelson, the next day I saw works up currently by each of those very artists. Leedy said in one of those panel discussions that the art history program needed to get up to snuff. No shit.



I ran into a couple of my favorite people from my own days there, now married with kid: painter [Archie Scott Gobber](#) and designer [Laura McGrew](#). I was psyched to hear that Scotty, who works for the best gallery in KC (stalwart [Dolphin](#)), has a show here at [Marty Walker](#) in May. In an urban exchange, he can go home afterwards and blog about what's wrong, and even what's right, with Dallas.

I'll talk about the museum next time. There were echoes of my [DAM experience in December](#), as well as thrilling visitations to some old faves in the "old" Nelson...also, there are some exciting public art initiatives in KC worth getting into.