

# Where new are the artists?

Festival programs are developing future exhibitors

By Nicole Sirdoreus  
SA Editor

The majority of artists who are currently on the show circuit have been there for years, sometimes as many as 20 or 30. Given these artists' festival tenures, they might be close to retiring or quitting the business altogether. When that time comes, where are the new artists who will take their places?

A primary location is emerging artists programs, which are found in shows all over the country. These initiatives may range in terms of details, but their ultimate goal is simple: to engage new artists, whether they are just exiting school or entering art as a second career, and get them accustomed to art show life.

## Programs guide then release

One of the most robust initiatives is the Emerging Artists as Entrepreneur program, which is connected with the St. Louis Art Fair in Missouri. This curriculum started chiefly as a way to let new artists exhibit in the fair, but it became much more comprehensive in 2010.

Cindy Lerick, executive director and president of Cultural Festivals, the producers of the St. Louis Art Fair, said she decided to cultivate this program because the



festival didn't truly own its original form. "It was run through St. Louis University, and we felt we were far removed. We decided to embrace the program and make it more substantial." Lerick used extensive resources to assemble it, including supply companies and circuit veteran Les Slesnick.

In this two-year program, participants (mostly college students) started by learning the business of art festivals. They attended casual seminars in which they studied how to sell, price and display their work.

During this time, the students apprenticed under professional artists and met the staff, jurors and other exhibitors from the St. Louis Art Fair.

Next year, participants will get



New artists are learning about art show life at emerging artists programs around the country. Among these artists are Spencer Corbett (left), Amanda Beller (lower left), Lauren Banka (top), Becca Schlaff (top right), Mike Stasko (center), Leah Cassens (far right) and Terry Scharf (below).



an even closer look at art shows by attending four more seminars: one with an accountant, one with an attorney, another with Wells Fargo advisers and the last with a volunteer who discusses life as an artist. After all that, the students will officially exhibit as emerging artists.

Presently, the rigorous program blends the new with the old. "In

the past, emerging artists only had to stay for a bit," Lerick said. "[But] the life of an artist is tough, and we wanted to give the whole picture. *You* have to be the one who brings your tent and your table. *You* have to know how to collect cash and do all the basics."

Another rather successful emerging artist program is

connected to the East Lansing Art Festival in Michigan. This one focuses strictly on college students and recent alumni.

Interested artists apply through Zapplication, just like regular exhibiting artists. They pay an application fee and provide images of their work, although no booth shot is required. These images are then juried, and the show accepts the best candidates. At the show, these artists are placed under a large tent with tables and chairs. They are each allotted a 10x10 space at no cost, and they must figure out how to set up their display.

"The program offers a chance for these artists to get their feet wet

and see if an art festival is something that works for them,” Festival Coordinator Corinn VanWyck said. “That first time you come to a festival as a new artist, when you’re trying to think of the logistics, like ‘How do I load my truck?’ ‘What tent do I need?’ it can be overwhelming.” As such, the initiative gives these artists an opportunity to talk to seasoned artists while getting feedback from the public. “It’s great for the industry, as we need to keep festivals going and get the next generation involved and showing their work.”

The Main Street Fort Worth Arts Festival in Texas also has a flourishing program, but it’s not limited to students. The only requirements for this 4-year-old program are that applicants live in Texas and have shown in fewer than three major outdoor art shows.

Applicants must go through the usual jury process, and only 12 are accepted per year. These artists then pay a lower booth fee and are provided with a tent. Once they are set up, emerging artists must figure out the remainder of the logistics on their own, giving them a comprehensive experience of life as an art festival exhibitor.

“A lot of shows across the country are starting to have these programs,” said Raquel Edwards, who serves on the Art in the Pearl board of directors in Portland, Oregon. Upon realizing this, Edwards decided to start one at her show.

Edwards took her ideas to the board, and it agreed that such a program would be advantageous for the local art community. “I believe it can give people the chance to see what an art show is like and see if it’s something they’d like to pursue,” she said.

The program launched this year, and it was open to artists in Washington and Oregon. As with other programs, artists apply, pay an application fee and are selected

by a jury. But in this version, once accepted, they pay a lower booth fee and are given a spacious 10x20 area and canopy. They are also granted lights, walls and electricity. Finally, they are matched with a mentor, either an exhibiting artist or a committee member. In this role, Edwards said the mentors “answered questions and talked about things they should think about, like how you hang your lights.”

## Emerging artists and their experiences

“Amazing” is how printmaker Lauren Banka described her first year with the St. Louis Art Fair program. After attending the sessions and mentoring with artists, Banka shadowed an exhibitor at the 2010 event. “Some were very good at saying, ‘In this situation, I would do this or that,’” she said.

Banka, a drawing and printmaking major at Washington University, also walked the show with a juror. “His experience was in 3-D work, and mine is 2-D, so there was a lot of interesting back and forth.” As such, Banka said the two talked about the rationale behind the scores he gave, and the interaction persuaded him to boost one artist’s results.

On the final day of the festival, Banka and the other emerging artists brought their own work, which was evaluated within an art fair context. Leah Cassens found that feedback extraordinarily helpful. The ceramicist and St. Louis University studio arts major said the experience taught her “everything about art fairs.”

In addition to learning about setup and teardown, Cassens said the students got a behind-the-scenes look at Zapplication, particularly regarding what jurors are and aren’t looking for. She also appreciated learning how to pack and unload

gear. “We saw how artists pack their vans, and then we helped put everything back,” she said.

Cassens is looking forward to next year’s fair, when she will price and exhibit her pieces in the emerging artist section. “I’ll probably show some vases, some bowls and some crazy abstract vessels,” she said.

Painter Spencer Corbett was an emerging artist at the East Lansing show in 2009 and won the program’s top award. “It was nice because I was still in school and pursuing painting,” he said. Corbett noted that the show had him figure out how to display his large-scale work himself, which he hadn’t done before. “I had to string paintings from bars and build platforms that would hold up paintings,” he said.

Printmaker Terry Scharf also took part in the East Lansing program in 2009 but as a nontraditional student. “Originally, I wanted to get a bachelor’s of fine arts [when I was] 18, but I wasn’t sure I could make a living in art,” Scharf said. Instead, she became a nurse practitioner.

However, Scharf was still drawn to art. After a fruitful career, she decided to go back to school, where she heard about East Lansing’s program. “It was a great experience, as [the show] provided information on setting up my work. I got to interact with the public and find out what they thought about my prints.”

The 2010 East Lansing Art Festival was Becca Schlaff’s first. The painter and recent graduate had been intimidated about getting into the art show business, but she was eager to pick up tips about the business itself. “I learned a lot at the show, especially about certain types of prints and giclees. I also got the chance to peek at what other artists were doing for displays.”

As an emerging artist in the 2010 Main Street Fort Worth Arts Festival, high school art teacher Amanda Beller was thrilled to talk

with experienced exhibitors and get ideas about her own work. She even traded work with these veterans. "The show ended up being wonderful," she said. "I sold more than I thought, and it was almost like Woodstock. It was a euphoria of four days of getting to commune with like-minded people."

Beller, a ceramics and 3-D artist, graduated from Harding University in 2005 with a bachelor's of science in Interior Design and a bachelor's of art in Art Education before becoming a teacher. She'd always been passionate about art, she said, but the timing was never right to tour the circuit. "I have two girls, and I kept thinking 'not this year,' 'not this year,'" Beller said. When she got more serious about her work, Beller applied to Main Street's emerging artist program.

Edwards and the Art in the Pearl mentors' assistance was instrumental to his experience at this year's event, pencil artist Mike Stasko said. "I wanted more people to see more work, and it really helped me gain exposure." He said the mentors passed on a lot of information, especially regarding booth setup. "They told us things to do, some not to do." This knowledge helped Stasko and the other

emerging artists concentrate on getting feedback from the public and selling their work.

Before taking part in this program, Stasko enjoyed 30 years in the IT industry. "I was a fine arts major in the mid '70s, and I found myself in Eugene, Oregon, trying to support myself." Difficulty in this arena made Stasko turn to math and computer science. But since he is growing closer to retirement age, he wanted to return to his first passion.

## Are shows in these artists' futures?

Emerging artists programs can certainly be encouraging, but art shows aren't for everyone. As Lerick said, exhibiting in national festivals is a tough life. "Even if they decide that art festivals aren't for them, it's still a great opportunity to see what's out there," VanWyck said.

Corbett returned to the 2010 East Lansing Art Festival as a regular exhibitor but hasn't exhibited since, given that he was accepted into graduate school at Indiana University. "I think I might try to do a festival a year and keep coming back to East Lansing," he said.

Corbett hopes to one day teach painting at the college level.

Cassens isn't sure where her path leads. "I do plan to one day get my master's, but right now I'm taking it one step at a time," she said.

At the same time, several emerging artists felt so invigorated by their programs that they plan to enter the art festival world. Schlaff said her experience with East Lansing made her postpone teaching and put more roots in art. "I've thanked [VanWyck] so many times for getting to be an emerging artist," she said. Schlaff plans to continue working art shows, traveling down to Florida in January.

Beller wants to reapply to the Main Street emerging artist program next year, as artists can participate twice. If she has a repeat performance, she said, she'll apply as a standard exhibitor the following year. "It's wonderful to be surrounded by passionate people who have the same goal."

Since Stasko has already enjoyed a fulfilling career, he's excited about the prospect of being a traveling artist. In fact, he has been building his art portfolio for the past three years in preparation. "Once I don't have a full-time job, I plan to do as many shows as I can nationally," he said. ☼



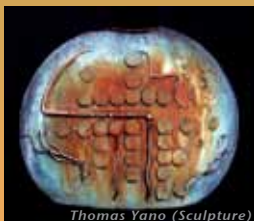
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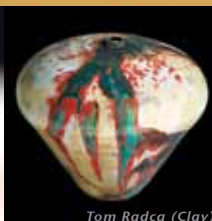
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