

Leave it to Bemis

Center's residency program offers stress-free creativity

By JOSH NICHOLS
Staff writer

Often, artists have an abundance of ability and potential but don't have the time, money or facilities to do their best work.

They must work eight-hour days to pay bills and only during free time are they able to create.

Then, the work often is done in a spare room or some other small space.

The artist's creativity is limited.

With a three-month residency program, the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha removes these limitations and allows artists to work in a stress-free, worry-free atmosphere.

"Artists can come work on their art in a problem-free environment," said Dan O'Kane, gallery director. "Here, they are allowed to focus all of their time on their work. They are under no pressure, no deadlines and have no specific assignments."

The Bemis Center is located in two warehouses in the historic Old Market district of downtown Omaha.

The center has 10,000 square feet of studio space, 8,000 square feet of sculpture space, a half-block of land available for outdoor performances and a 4,000-square-foot gallery.

It also has an extensive art library, a wood-working shop, printmaking facilities, a large-scale ceramic sculpture facility and many other resources.



"The Bemis is a very large place," O'Kane said. "The large facilities allow artists — used to making art in the closet or dining room — more space to make art they aren't normally able to do."

The Bemis residency program, developed in 1985, invites 35 artists a year from around the world to take part. More than 400 artists each year turn in applications.

"People are chosen strictly on the work they have made. Anyone is eligible to apply," O'Kane said.

Each applicant's work is reviewed by a committee of four artists, an arts professional and a curator or museum director, O'Kane said.

Mo Neal, an assistant professor of art and art history at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has twice been on the selection committee at the Bemis Center.

She said the group looks at slides of art from all over the world.

An array of sculptors, painters, performers and photographers come from such places as New York, California, France and Japan to do residencies at the Bemis Center.

"We look for work that has been thought out and is unique to the individual's personality," Neal said.

Once chosen, an artist comes to the Bemis Center and works on his or her art for three months. They live at the studio for free and are provided anywhere from a \$500 to \$1,000 monthly stipend.

A staff of professional artists helps the residents build and develop their work.

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DAN O'KANE
Bemis gallery director

All that is required of the residents is that they donate to the center a piece of artwork created during the residency.

Neal sculpted as a Bemis Center resident in the summer of 1993.

"Having a residency is like graduate school without a committee overlooking you," she said.

She described her residency as three months during which she did her work without worrying about anything else.

"You could get up in the morning and go to work in just a T-shirt. You didn't even need to brush your teeth if you didn't want to."

O'Kane stressed that the Bemis Center is a nonprofit organization. With support from private and corporate donors and public funding, the center allows artists time to work on their art, share their talents in classes and display their creations.

"It also allows Omaha to see cutting-edge contemporary art," O'Kane said.



LIZ MEACHAM/DN

TOP: Janet Laver and Barbra Hoffman, both of Denver, Colo., came to the Bemis Center while passing through Omaha to Iowa City.

ABOVE: Dan O'Kane is the director of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, which is on the corner of 12th and Leavenworth streets in Omaha.

Photos link past to the present

By DANELL MCCOY
Staff writer

In 1989, the fall of communism and the disappearance of the Iron Curtain opened an area of the world that had been closed for almost 40 years.

For some, it meant democracy had won. For others, including Sylvia De Swaan, it meant the doors to their past had been re-opened.

De Swaan, a Romanian-born Jew, saw this as an opportunity to look at the forgotten world of her childhood.

Until Nov. 28, a collection of black-and-white photographs — titled "Return" — taken during De Swaan's return to Romania will be on exhibit at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, 724 S. 12th St., in Omaha.

In her photographs, the viewer sees De Swaan's struggle to make connections with the past and the present.

"This is a project about identity," De Swaan said. "I came to the U.S. when I was 10 years old. It was like a door shut behind me in a sense, because it was another world, because there was no contact, because it was the Iron Curtain and because I arrived in the U.S. in the 1950s, and no one wanted to know about anything."

De Swaan said she hadn't thought about her past until communism fell,

"I do want to create something of my history. But it's not isolating it to just the past."

SYLVIA DE SWAAN
photographer

and she suddenly yearned to return.

Immediately, she thought a train should carry her on her journey, during which De Swaan would contemplate her personal history.

Many of her pictures seem almost antique, but a trained eye can pick out the differences between time and place.

One of her photographs shows the mass graves in Iasi, Romania. Although it looks old and solemn, tall, modern buildings fill the background.

"In some aspects, I do want to create something of my history," Drake said. "But it's not isolating it to just the past."

De Swaan said when she began her journey, she had an idea of what she wanted to do. The how, however, escaped her.

"I didn't know how I was going to depict the past or how to depict what isn't there anymore," De Swaan said.

"Like when I got to Czernowitz, my hometown, it was a sunny summer day, and it was beautiful, and people were

walking around having fun like they were everywhere else in the world. So what was I supposed to photograph that would express these other layers of history that exist there?"

De Swaan overcame this obstacle by taking photos of images that were already captured.

In her photograph "The History Lesson," De Swaan captured images of the German army from a film she saw while visiting a concentration camp.

Instead of taking pictures of the camp itself, De Swaan took a picture of the screen during the film to bring the camp's horror back to life.

De Swaan said her exhibit was not specifically about the Holocaust. Instead, it was a way for her to bridge the gap between time and place.

"I don't expect people to come out with the bottom line," she said. "I want them to ponder it. None of my images, nor my text, actually draws a conclusion."

Video exhibit studies art of communication

By DANELL MCCOY
Staff writer

Every day and night, the streets outside the El Paso, Texas, county jail are clogged with people trying to communicate with those inside.

They communicate in silence with family and friends using a simple sign language.

This intriguing phenomenon is the basis for James Drake's installation titled "Tongue-Cut Sparrows," which is being shown until Nov. 28 at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, 724 S. 12th St. in Omaha.

Drake, a resident of El Paso, was first drawn to this private language after watching some of the people — including former gang members — speak it.

"I thought, 'This is obviously some sort of language that, at least, I'm not privy to,'" Drake said.

He asked a friend, who was an ex-gang member, to introduce him to some of the people outside the jail.

The Bemis Center exhibit focusing on the video and video stills Drake made of several women interacting

with the inmates by signing.

The video is split into three pieces. The middle piece shows one woman continually signing. The two side pieces change from views of the women's faces to poetry by Shakespeare, Federico Lorca, Benjamin Saenz and Jorge Borges.

The poetry presented on the screen translates what the girls are signing to the inmates.

"I would copy different poetry that I liked, that I thought was appropriate," Drake said. "Then I would have (the girls) pick the different pieces that they liked or that they thought they could sign, and those are the poems we used for the film."

The exhibit also includes still photographs taken of the prisoners signing back through the reflection of the light in their cells.

Drake said these pieces show the power and beauty of communication.

"I think that art is about communication, about communicating something," he said. "As an artist, to me, it meant not only communicating art but communicating desires and emotions, love and loss."