

THE ART SEEN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
REAGAN ALLEN

**AT THE THE FOREFRONT
OF A FLOURISHING
ARTS COMMUNITY,
THESE ORGANIZATIONS
LOOK FOR WAYS TO
HELP ARTISTS AND ART
PATRONS REACH THEIR
FULL POTENTIAL.**

The Indianapolis Art Center was founded during the Great Depression to give out-of-work artists meaningful employment. IAC's Director of Exhibitions and Events, Kyle Harrington continues that mission of elevating artists to this day. He works to create opportunities for artists of every type, but works especially hard to highlight those that other galleries might shy away from.

"I'm in a position to dissolve barriers for people that might have fewer opportunities," he says. "We try to spread our resources to include as many artists as possible, and we try not to get pigeonholed." IAC has six galleries, and it installs a new show every six to eight weeks, so there's always someone new in the spotlight.

"I remember what it was like to be an emerging artist, and I remember all the obstacles I faced," he says. "I'm doing what I wish people had done for me at that point in my life."

The center tries to give exposure to as many artists and as many types of art as possible. Since it shows many artists and a variety of work, the IAC embraces the liberty of showing art that might be considered risky or not commercially viable. "It's art for art's sake," Harrington says. "It's art that might otherwise be ignored. We feel like we're providing a well-rounded experience for the visitor, because we can show art that we feel deserves to be shown."

Harrington actively searches for new artists to feature in his galleries, instead of waiting for them to pop up on his radar. He combs social media, shows up at artist talks and openings, and asks people around town who is out there worth seeing.

"I'm nosy basically," he says. He keeps a huge notebook that's filled with the names of local artists he's

either seen or heard about and wants to work with, and he uses it like a cookbook to curate shows.

So what can Indianapolis do to reciprocate his effort to create an environment that will produce and grow ambitious artists? Simple. "Indianapolis can't be afraid to strut it like a peacock," he says. "Indianapolis has an arts scene that holds up nationally, but we have a very Midwestern tendency to apologize for our own presence and think we don't belong. We need to respect ourselves and see ourselves as valid, as equals in the art world."

He also thinks we need to look at artists as resources for the city, like talent to be recruited. "We can convince people to move to Indianapolis all we want, but if they get here and there's nothing for them, they won't stay," he says.

On the flip side, Harrington offers simple advice for young artists: "Just show up." He continues, "Art is a way for people to connect and if you're not out there, you're ignoring the whole point of being an artist. Dive into the scene! Commit to it. Be a sponge. Find out who people are and what their process is."

Harrington offers an apt analogy, comparing the Indianapolis art scene to a pond full of fish. If you distribute the fish food in a way that only a few of the fish have access to it, you'll wind up with a few giant fish and a bunch of malnourished fish fighting over the scraps. He says it's better to distribute resources equally, even (or perhaps especially) to the fish that haven't established themselves yet. He says we should be talking about how to make sure all the fish in the pond have a shot.

Harrington does his best to make sure the growth in the local art scene is equitable. "Basically, our options are to intentionally cultivate artists or to lose them to brain drain," he says.

KYLE HARRINGTON OF INDIANAPOLIS ARTS CENTER

WORDS BY
JOHN HELLING

SHANNON LINKER OF ARTS COUNCIL OF INDIANAPOLIS

WORDS BY
CRYSTAL HAMMON

Recovering from the 2008 recession has been an uphill climb for the Indianapolis arts community, but there are numerous signs that a full comeback is near. "In all sectors, we're seeing some amazing and promising things," says Shannon Linker, the interim president of the Arts Council of Indianapolis (ACI).

Linker, a sixteen-year veteran at the ACI, leads an organization plagued by the challenges arts councils have always had, plus a few new ones. "Funding is always going to be an issue," she says. "We have a very supportive mayor, but our budgets are very tight. As much as the city might want to get us back to the levels of funding we had before the recession, it's going to be very difficult."

INDICATIONS OF A RESILIENT ARTS COMMUNITY

Despite local pride in a vibrant arts scene, the ACI receives less funding than arts organizations in peer Midwest cities, according to Linker. That may be part of the reason the Indianapolis arts community has not recovered as quickly as other cities.

Nevertheless, an upward trend in economic data suggests the local arts scene may soon recover all the ground lost during the recession. An annual survey by Americans for the Arts showed \$486 million in local economic activity drawn from the Indianapolis non-profit arts sector in 2007. By 2010 the same indicator dropped to \$384 million, but last year it climbed to \$440 million.

Linker sees anecdotal signs of resurgence in the city's commercial art galleries. Only a few galleries were left after 2008, but she says the count has returned to its pre-recession level. "We also have many new and thriving dance companies, including the Phoenix Rising Dance Company, Kids Dance Outreach, Ballet Theatre of Indiana, Indianapolis City Ballet, and Indiana Ballet Conservatory," she says.

Attaining comparable levels of arts funding with peer cities remains an ACI goal. Meanwhile Indianapolis offers other favorable assets to the arts community, including robust support from foundations, corporate donors, and individual philanthropists.

"When Lilly Endowment, Inc. recently announced its cultural innovation grants [Strengthening Indianapolis through Arts and Cultural Innovation], there was a huge boost of excitement and energy in the Indianapolis arts community," Linker says. "Every arts organization was thinking, 'Wow. What could we do if we got this kind of funding?' They all pulled together amazing ideas and submitted them. The endowment received over 250 applications and 25 of those have moved forward to the second round."

Indianapolis is a city where you can meet and know practically anyone. Linker says that trait gives artists and arts organizations easy access to a network of people who can support their work. Deals can be made over coffee. Case in point: Jeremy Efrogmson learned informally about The House Life Project and decided to help fund its startup. The project reimagines a vacant house as a hub for art and culture.

REACHING NEW AUDIENCES FOR THE ARTS

Like arts councils in every city, the ACI is also confronting changing audience demographics that threaten the health of arts organizations. "It's not just the idea that people who used to go to art galleries, museums, symphonies, and theatrical performances are getting older," she says. "We also have young people of color who may not feel comfortable in a western, idealized style of art presentation. We have to make sure our arts organizations are connecting to these communities. We can't keep doing the same things and expect to reach them."

The ACI has responded by changing the organization's approach to awarding grants. "Through our grant program we've started working on support for smaller organizations that are better able to adapt to these new demographics," she says. "We've been able to allocate money for them to grow the entire arts audience."

One example is Indy Convergence, a small, westside non-profit embedded in a part of the city that was considered a cultural arts desert. "There were no arts organizations anywhere nearby," Linker says. "Nothing was happening. They spent a year in the community, talking to people and learning what the desires and needs were."

Indy Convergence started bringing artists from all over the country to do six-week residencies and workshops. "Now, it has grown into a community center that offers just about anything you can imagine," she says. "They are reaching an audience that some of our other arts organizations would just not be able to reach." Linker says shifting money away from medium and larger arts organizations was controversial, but many larger cities applauded the ACI for its progressive decision.

OVERCOMING A NATIONAL THREAT

Linker is buoyed by the national show of public support for the arts when President Trump proposed dissolving the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)—a move that could have devastated the arts in big cities and small towns across the country.

"So many people stood up and took it to heart," Linker says. "Everyone was saying, 'Are you kidding? The one thing we know uplifts our country, educates us, and makes us better people is the arts. What we invest in the arts is nothing compared to what we get out of it in our communities.' People get it. They understand that the arts bring such value to our community—and not just in terms of economic impact, but in terms of making communities whole, allowing children to express themselves, do the right thing, and develop empathy. It's hard to put a value on that, yet people said it was worth this and more."

The NEA did not go away. "In fact, we saw an increase in the NEA budget that year," Linker says. "And the same thing happened again this year. That's really good news, and hopefully, it will continue."

RESPONDING TO THE ENTIRE ARTS COMMUNITY

During her tenure at the ACI, Linker has been responsible for developing the Artist Services Program. When the program began, the ACI held roundtable discussions with artists from all disciplines. One of problems identified was access to

information that could benefit artists in central Indiana. "We created the Artist Opportunity E-newsletter," Linker says. "That is how we share anything we know about any opportunity that would be advantageous to your career. It's the no-brainer first step for any artist."

As a visual artist with a background in art history, Linker admits that she is especially attuned to individual artists, but the ACI strives to maintain a diverse staff that understands and responds to the needs all disciplines within the arts community. The organization maintains an aggressive outreach effort to hear and connect members of the arts community, encouraging artists from all disciplines to apply for its grants.

When artists are outspoken about their needs, Linker says the ACI always finds a way to help. "We've got all of these different disciplines, often working within their own silos," Linker says. "That's not a good thing, so we started Artist Industry Nights." Underwritten by the Willard and Ann Levin Foundation, these evenings are free networking events for all local artists.

The idea is to bring writers, graphic designers, painters, actors, theater people, musicians, and other artists together without an agenda, to meet, talk, and explore possible collaborations. A theater director struggling to create a set design may meet a visual artist who can create exactly what's needed. "We're seeing some amazing projects come from this support system," Linker says. <





THIS FALL, IMOCA HOSTS AN ARTIST TALK BY RACHEL HAYES, WHOSE ART IS ON DISPLAY AT THE CITYWAY GALLERY THROUGH DECEMBER. IN NOVEMBER, THEY'RE HOPING TO FACILITATE THEIR FIRST BOOK CLUB, WHICH WILL EXPLORE TEXTILE ART.

MIKE BARCLAY OF

iMOCA

WORDS BY
CRYSTAL HAMMON

A lot of things have changed since the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art (iMOCA) was founded in 2001. At the time, contemporary art was almost absent from the local art scene.

"We helped fill that void, but since then, there's been a resurgence in contemporary art," says Mike Barclay, iMOCA's director of exhibitions.

From the start, iMOCA considered itself a museum without walls, relying on the historic Emelie Building and later the Murphy Building for temporary gallery space and a place to get established. Most recently, it partnered with the Buckingham Companies and Buckingham Foundation to curate CityWay Gallery in The Alexander Hotel.

A funny thing happened on the way to becoming one of the city's most visible advocates for contemporary art. Even the most established museums and arts organizations were understanding the urgency of reaching new audiences, especially in underserved neighborhoods. As a newcomer to the Indianapolis arts ecology, iMOCA had limited resources, and its scrappy, boots-on-the-ground mentality was both a necessity and a stroke of genius.

A few years ago, Barclay and Brent Aldrich, director of operations at iMOCA, started working within the Englewood neighborhood as the arts partner in Great Places 2020, hoping to cultivate strategic relationships that could spread enthusiasm for contemporary art. Their efforts paid off in the form of several additional public art projects and programs, including partners such as:

- CAT HEAD PRESS
- INDIANA LANDMARKS
- THE LOCAL INITIATIVE SPORTS CORPORATION (LISC) AND ENGLEWOOD COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION
- SIMON YOUTH ACADEMY
- HOLY CROSS NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION
- PARAMOUNT SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE

In the Holy Cross neighborhood, for example, iMOCA spearheaded an art project with ideas drawn from eighth-grade students at Paramount School of Excellence. Students worked with professional designers and business owners to design and paint an outdoor mural. The idea was to offer a meaningful arts experience at a higher level of professionalism than a school art class might provide.

"It was an opportunity to engage a lot of people who wouldn't normally have a connection with each other, merge different ideas and open people's minds to new concepts," Barclay says.

At the Simon Youth Academy, iMOCA has facilitated workshops on photography in art history, which culminated in a pop-up show in Simon Malls, featuring autobiographical photographs done by students.

"We're really happy with these partnerships, which have given us access to people we might never have met if we hadn't been involved in the community," he says.

Some programs happened so organically that Aldrich and Barclay often wondered if they were only doing interim work that would change once iMOCA was more established. The results suggested something more significant. "Doing all these public projects has given us a lot of traction," Aldrich says. "And the opportunities just keep coming. Many of them have risen to a level that they may be more primary than we first thought."

iMOCA's success in building a bigger footprint through community partnerships recently led to a ten-month feasibility study to guide the organization forward and identify unmet needs. One of the study's insights has implications for future fundraising efforts. While the number of arts organizations in the city has increased, funding is somewhat stagnant. If that remains true, then its inventive, offbeat and mobile approach is a smart use of resources – a canny attribute that any arts organization would be glad to have.

From the outside, it may appear that iMOCA has taken a long time to find its groove. Barclay says there's a good reason for that. "It takes a while to investigate opportunities, to do your due diligence, and really understand your organization from an inside and outside perspective," he says.

Having a physical space is still desirable, but moving to a permanent home, which could happen as early as 2019, is unlikely to change iMOCA's emphasis on programming and community partnerships. "We love gallery exhibitions, and we are still committed to doing some of that, but we've definitely realized that it doesn't have to be the only thing we do," Aldrich says. iMOCA expects 2019 to be a big year for reaching out to new audiences, launching new programs, and supporting emerging and mid-career artists with opportunities to advance their careers.

A permanent home will be beneficial in some ways, yet not without challenges. "The trick of having a physical space is how to be thoughtful about tying exhibitions and programming together," Aldrich says. "Education is so important for getting people in a space and engaged, so we want to have a robust programming and education element, and do it in a way that's accessible and deliberate." <

JOANNA TAFT OF

THE HARRISON CENTER

WORDS BY
CRYSTAL HAMMON



By her own admission, Joanna Taft has drawn very few boundaries between her personal life and her role as executive director at the Harrison Center. As a result, the organizational philosophy that guides the seventeen-year-old studio center for visual artists seems almost inseparable from the one that drives its founding leader.

A two-word meme may capture it best: relationships matter. You can see evidence of its impact in the steady growth of artists who sell work and have studio space there, and in the organization's manifold effort to add strength and vibrancy to Indianapolis. Beginning in 2001 with one gallery and ten artists, the Harrison Center now has thirty-six artists and five galleries.

When an artist lands a space here, they get what Taft calls "wraparound services." That includes affordable studio and gallery space, exhibit opportunities, paid work, access to art patrons who can buy their work, assistance with getting residencies, and even help finding housing when it's needed.

Taft says the resident artists are doing well. "Many of them travel to other cities to make new connections for their businesses, or they're outside their studios doing plein air painting," she says. "When they aren't here they aren't losing opportunities, because we can still sell their work while they're gone."

As artists have matured, the organization has evolved with them, offering improved services aimed at deepening art patronage. Last summer, for example, it rented gallery space in Chicago for two months. "It was a grand experiment to show our artists, and to see what kind of relationships we could build there," Taft says. "It was great to help us develop plans for our next steps."

In 2018, the Harrison Center started ArtDish, a monthly dinner that allows potential patrons to get acquainted with a featured artist over a meal prepared by a rotating roster of celebrity chefs. Every dinner through the end of 2018 is sold out, and the featured artists are selling work.

"As often as possible, we need to eat with people," Taft says. "This is the future – helping our artists develop relationships and inviting people into a rich conversation about art. Our artists feel like a million bucks and people get a better understanding of what we do here, and what the artist's life is like."

Judging from the waiting list of applicants for studio space, the Harrison Center is a coveted place to take an art career to the next level, but it's not for every artist. The organization values a mix of artists with different levels of experience and various media. It rarely adds a new artist without a previous relationship that has tested an artist's desire to work as part of a team. "We're a community service, and we're not here for ourselves. We're here for others," she says. "We need artists who need other people and who know they need to work together in order for other people to be successful. When we have an open studio event, you may not sell that night, but your next-door neighbor might."

HOLDING ONTO LOCAL CREATIVE TALENT

Taft is proud of the Harrison Center's influence in Indianapolis, but acknowledges that its progress to this point has not been a straight line upward. Early on, things were moving along according to plan. Artists were selling work, connecting with established collectors and with new ones who were buying their first pieces of original art.

But one day Taft got a wakeup call from several resident artists. They wanted to move to New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. "I asked 'Why don't you like it here?'" and they told me they needed to move to larger cities where there were more art patrons," she says. Taft was flummoxed by the problem, knowing it would take a long time to develop the kind of serious art patronage they were describing.

Meanwhile, things were changing in the neighborhood surrounding the Harrison Center. Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis moved its Herron School of Art and Design from its nearby location to a new on-campus site, leaving three vacant buildings. The school's absence removed a positive force in the neighborhood and created new problems, such as crime and vandalism. Former mayor Bart Peterson asked Taft to sit on a commission to determine what to do with the school's former site.

A lot of ideas were floated, but none of them seemed sustainable, fundable, or exciting enough to get people passionate about Taft's trifold test for what makes a good project. From the back of the room, she listened quietly, and then raised her hand. "You know, there's this charter school movement," she said.

"I don't know much about it, but what if we honored the art education history of that site by starting a high school designed to grow art patrons – well-rounded citizens who would become our voters, artists, doctors, volunteers, soccer coaches – all the people we need for a well-rounded society?"

Soon afterward, efforts began to convert the site into Herron High School, an award-winning school that prepares students for success in college and in life. Taft stayed involved in the project, although she admits that she was often a little scared. "I learned that you can get a lot of work done when you're afraid," she says.

BEYOND FOUR WALLS

Taft's involvement in that transition also taught a valuable lesson about looking beyond the four walls of the Harrison Center. "In the beginning we were just programming in our building, and then we began to look out in the community at challenges and come up with distinctively cultural solutions."

One of those challenges has been the cultural and economic gentrification of the city as new people seek housing in old neighborhoods. Taft says the organization's past work has revitalized neighborhoods, but its current and future work is much more vested in honoring the past, elevating the stories of long-term residents and businesses, and being inclusive to people who've been part of these neighborhoods for decades.

"We believe that the arts can be used for healing, whether it's for people who are lonely and left out, or for neighborhoods that are forgotten or going through change," Taft says. "That's the focus of our neighborhood work. We're not here to make our neighborhood look good, even though some of our work may do that. We're here to elevate stories and to bring people of all backgrounds together to be known and loved, and in our hearts, all of us want to be known and loved." <