

# STATE OF

MANY OF THE CITY'S ARTS  
DOES THAT MAKE MILWAUKEE

FEBRUARY  
2019

STS

# THE ARTS

MUSES

ORGANIZATIONS ARE THRIVING.  
A BONA FIDE CULTURAL CAPITAL?

AUDIE

BY LINDSEY ANDERSON

Hundreds attended the Saint Kate reveal, where the painter Reginald Baylor (below) spoke about the city's new arts hotel.



# IT'S

Through Sculpture Milwaukee, works by internationally renowned artists are installed Downtown each year.



**A CHILLY EVENING** in November, and hundreds of creative professionals and philanthropists have packed the lobby of the InterContinental Hotel to hear about the latest addition to the city's cultural scene. Artists congregate around a long table near the entrance, doodling on cards provided for the purpose. Quentin Allums, a local influencer whose videos have racked up more than a million views on LinkedIn (yes, LinkedIn), sips something near a bar on the other side of the room. Members of the music collective New Age Narcissism – dressed like they've come straight from a photo shoot for their latest album – chat nearby.

The lobby, which had been decorated in shades of beige and brown when it opened a decade ago, is bathed in soft, scarlet light. The same shade of red appears on banners, on bespoke napkins, on staff shirts bearing cryptic messages such as "EXPECT CHANGE" and "COME CLOSER ABANDON DOUBT." Even the signature drinks are red.





Eventually, when more than a few of those drinks have disappeared, the artist Reginald Baylor strides over to a stage near the center of the room. Most of the guests already know that The Marcus Corp. will be rebranding the InterContinental in the coming months, giving it a new name and a new look. But they're only learning about the particulars of the project now.

The hotel's new name, which pays homage to the patron saint of the arts, will be Saint Kate The Arts Hotel. And according to Marcus Corp. President and CEO Greg Marcus – who follows Baylor to the stage – his company will be working with a cohort of local creatives to transform the property into the city's first arts hotel.

Baylor isn't the only well-known artist to talk that night. Ken-David Masur, the internationally renowned conductor and the new music director of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, speaks briefly. So does fashion designer Linda Marcus, known nationally for her star turn on season 15 of "Project Runway" and locally for her line of luxury handbags. And a host of performers – a hip-hop duo from Danceworks, MSO musicians, the aforementioned members of New Age Narcissism – take turns regaling the guests throughout the evening.

The event – as buzzy and well-attended as launch parties in much bigger cities – seems to have been designed in part to signal to the attendees that Milwaukee isn't just a beer and brats town anymore. It's hip. It's arty. It's, to borrow a phrase from the brochures that hotel staffers hand out at the end of the evening, "a place where creators can feel represented, a place where they can feel at home."

Many local artists and entrepreneurs believe that the development of a vibrant and inclusive cultural scene of the sort that the new Saint Kate purports to support has been a long time coming. "To have the DaVincis and the Michelangelos of the world," says John Shannon, owner of Guardian Fine Art Services, "there needs to be a fertile ground."

#### A STRONG FOUNDATION

**OTHER MILWAUKEEANS** believe that the city has long had a thriving arts scene. Steve Marcus, former chairman of The Marcus Corp., says as much during an afternoon meeting at the hotel a few weeks after the Saint Kate preview bash: "If we didn't have the arts we have, Milwaukee would just be a cold city on the Midwestern plains. What would there be of interest here?" He also acknowledges that, though high-caliber cultural institutions like the Milwaukee Art Museum on the lakefront, the Milwaukee Repertory Theater and the MSO have been around since the 1950s, the city has struggled to sustain smaller arts organizations and venues in its more recent history.

Marcus considers Wisconsin Avenue, once a thriving arts and entertainment corridor, emblematic of that struggle. "There were a lot of theaters on the avenue, but they're all gone now," he says. "My sense was that it needed something to give it life, to give people a reason to come."

About 10 years ago, Marcus began to brainstorm ways to revitalize the avenue. He knew that cultural events, such as Summerfest and the Lakefront Festival of Art, can draw huge crowds. So he decided to create a free, outdoor exhibition featuring work by internationally renowned artists installed along Wisconsin Avenue. Thus Sculpture Milwaukee, which celebrates its third anniversary this year, was born.

Since its inception, the exhibition has remained on view for several months each year. And while it's hard to tell exactly how many people visit it annually, if Instagram photos and Facebook posts are any indication, it's already become a popular destination for locals and out-of-towners alike.

Marcus considers Sculpture Milwaukee as much an economic development project as an artistic one. "Ultimately the idea is to energize our Downtown," he says. And his son Greg thinks of Saint Kate – slated to open this spring – in



much the same way, as a property that's part hotel, part gathering place and exhibition space for local creatives.

Both the elder and younger Marcuses remain committed to the idea that the city's artistic community has been, and will remain, strong as long as Milwaukeeans continue to support their cultural institutions. And they have every reason to remain optimistic. Since Steve's father, Ben, opened a single-screen movie theater in Ripon in 1935, their family business has grown into a sprawling multi-state, multi-sector enterprise, with movie theaters and hotels scattered across the country. And they've seen firsthand that when a city's arts organizations are flourishing, its hotels and restaurants and bars and boutiques tend to thrive, too.

"The movie industry teaches you that you can have a successful business devoted to the arts," Greg says. "You can do well by doing good."

#### MONEY MATTERS

**ON A RECENT** trip to Milwaukee Ballet's offices in Walker's Point, Donald and Donna Baumgartner sit down with the company's artistic director, Michael Pink, to talk about the strength of the city's artistic and philanthropic community.

The building that the company has called home since 1981 isn't aging well. Its ceilings sag. Its rooms are cramped. And the dancers who practice in its drafty studio spaces often need to wait in line to use its bathrooms.

Convinced that it needed room to grow, the company recently revealed a \$26 million capital campaign – as of late December, 93 percent achieved – hoping to raise enough money to build a new instructional facility and fund new artistic initiatives. It isn't the only nonprofit currently raising money for a big-budget building project, though. The MSO is busily renovating the Warner Grand Theatre, keen to finally control a venue of its own. The Milwaukee Public Museum will likely lose its accreditation if it can't find a new home soon. And the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts is looking to revamp both its interior and exterior spaces within the next few years.

All of those projects come with multimillion-dollar price tags, and Milwaukee Ballet might have struggled to fund its own campaign if the Baumgartners – longtime philanthropists who have donated to many of the city's civic and cultural institutions – hadn't gifted it \$10 million, enabling the company to break ground on a new facility last year. The aptly named Baumgartner Center for Dance is slated to open this fall in the Third Ward.



## The Culture Continuum

MILWAUKEE'S ARTISTIC INSTITUTIONS HAVE SEEN MANY HIGHS, AND LOWS, OVER THE LAST 10 YEARS.

HIGH

**UPAF RAISES** more than \$12 million during its 50th anniversary campaign in 2017.

**FIRST STAGE**, one of the largest children's theaters in the country, begins offering sensory-friendly performances for kids with special needs in 2012.

**OSCAR-WINNING** Milwaukee native John Ridley opens his creative incubator, Nō Studios, in 2018.

**MILWAUKEE FILM** steadily ratchets up attendance every year from its founding in 2008 to 2017. (The number slipped slightly in 2018.)

**IN 2015**, the Milwaukee Art Museum acquires and displays a portrait of Pope Benedict XVI fashioned from 17,000 colored condoms. Reactions to the work, "Eggs Benedict," are mixed.

**STILL SMARTING** from the recession, the Milwaukee Repertory Theater racks up a deficit of nearly \$375,000 during its 2012-13 season. On the plus side, its attendance numbers are improving.

**FOUR OF THE** city's most established art galleries – run by Cissie Peltz, Elaine Erickson, Dean Jensen and Katie Gingrass – close between 2014 and 2017.

**THE FLORENTINE OPERA** says goodbye to its general director, William Florescu, who resigns in May 2018 after sexual misconduct allegations are leveled against him. Good on the Florentine, bad on Florescu.

LOW





Among major philanthropists supporting the arts in Milwaukee are Donald and Donna Baumgartner (pictured with Milwaukee Ballet Artistic Director Michael Pink, above right) and Steve (left) and Greg Marcus, in photo at left.



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Like the Marcuses, the Baumgartners believe that the city has long punched above its weight culturally, and that arts organizations can help strengthen local economies. "I don't think many cities our size come even close, in terms of cultural offerings, to what we have," says Donald, who founded Paper Machinery Corp. in 1951. "I spent a lifetime trying to hire people to my company. Potential employees are interested in living in cities with thriving arts scenes."

"We'd like to see the funding grow," Donna adds. "It'd be nice if there was a percentage of government funding set aside for the arts."

Pink, who grew up in England and has worked in several cities across multiple countries, agrees. "On the other side of the pond, the arts are subsidized by taxpayer money," he says. "The gov-

ernment believes that every citizen should have access to high-quality arts."

Not everyone likes the idea of subsidizing the arts. In 2016, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce failed to persuade Milwaukee County residents to pay 0.5 percent more in sales taxes for five years to help fund the upkeep of major cultural institutions. But data suggest that kind of investment can pay off, as states that strongly support their cultural organizations also tend to boast better-than-average economies and happier residents.

Fortunately, even though the United States devotes a significantly smaller slice of its budgetary pie to the arts, and Wisconsin spends less per capita than 47 of 50 states, Milwaukee fares well in terms of the private support it shows its cultural organizations. Deanna Tillisch says that this can be chalked up largely to the strength of the local philanthropic community. As the president and CEO of the United Performing Arts Fund, the largest organization of its kind in the country, Tillisch works with donors such as the Baumgartners to provide operational support for 14 of the city's performing arts groups. And all of those groups – Milwaukee Ballet, First Stage, the Florentine Opera Company, the Rep, Skylight Music Theatre and the MSO among them – have received more money from UPAF than from any of their other donors.

Citing a 2018 arts vibrancy index created by Southern Methodist University, Tillisch says that Milwaukee scores in the 95th percentile in terms of how much residents spend on the arts. "People value what the arts bring to the community," she says. But she also acknowledges that, according to the same index, the city shows scant support for individual artists.

#### BETTER TOGETHER

**SEVERAL PEOPLE** interviewed for this story echoed Tillisch's assertion that, while the city's larger arts organizations are mostly thriving, and have been



for years, artists themselves haven't necessarily been faring as well.

From the living room of her art-filled East Side home, Katie Heil suggests as much over an afternoon meeting with her friend and colleague Christine Harris about Imagine MKE. Heil founded the initiative to foster more collaboration among artists and arts groups working across disciplines. "I hope that we can start to tell a cohesive story about the city, and that we'll include individual artists in that story," she says. "I want to see them lifted up, because they'll raise up the institutions, too."

Though Imagine MKE won't officially launch until later this year, Heil and her cohort have already begun raising money for the organization and are actively looking for an executive director to head it up. And Harris – who served as president and CEO of the Cultural Alliance of Greater Milwaukee before becoming a creative consultant – has been instrumental in facilitating the organization's launch, leveraging her connections and experience to raise funds and awareness. "We want to be available," she says. "We can provide a kind of clearinghouse, a place where people can bring their thoughts and ideas and figure out where the gaps are and what's needed together."

They aren't the only ones who think that more partnerships between individuals and organizations would be a boon for the city.

Deb Brehmer, owner of The Portrait Society Gallery, who formerly oversaw *Art Muscle* (a magazine covering the local scene that ran from 1986 to 1997 with a circulation of 20,000), says she's seen many established galleries close their doors in recent years. But she remains optimistic that artists and creative entrepreneurs will be able to adapt to changing market conditions by working together. "Some new smaller galleries are smartly adopting the studio space rental and gallery combination model so they are not fully dependent on income from art sales," she says. "This model also fosters collaboration and lessens the divide between the makers and sellers of art."

And Skylight Artistic Director Ray Jivoff, who's been an active member of the Milwaukee theater community since he moved here in 1988, says performing arts organizations have made strides in recent years to help support the performers who work with them. "There really is a sense of community here. Folks go from one company to another, and I think that openness differentiates us from most cities," he says. "Everyone feels that it's beneficial to give as many artists opportunities as possible. There's a real benefit to being open to sharing talent."



Portrait Society Gallery owner Deb Brehmer (above) says that artists and gallerists are working together to weather the art market's economic storms.



88Nine Radio Milwaukee has helped further the careers of many musicians, such as Lex Allen, Zed Kenzo (both pictured in the photo above right), Crystal Knives (below left) and Abby Jeanne (below right).



## TALENT SCOUT

**A 2015 TRANSPLANT** from Dallas, Clare da Silva admits that she wasn't initially eager to relocate to Milwaukee. "When I told people I was moving here, they'd say, 'Oh, well, it's close to Chicago. You could always hop on the train if you need some culture.'"

But da Silva, program director of the fledgling arts initiative Fellowship.art, was pleasantly surprised by the number of arts groups and events she found around town. And since her arrival here, she's seen many other young, creative people move to the city. "There's something in the air right now – a new wave of interest in the arts."

Through her work with Fellowship.art, a 12-week accelerator program that the Wisconsin-based venture capital fund gener8tor launched last year, da Silva awards grants to artists and helps them find mentors. "We don't work miracles. We can't promise that the artists will go on to have massively successful careers, but we can put some resources in front of them and some muscle behind them," she says.

Both personally and professionally, da Silva has found that culture can drive job seekers to a city. And as far as she's concerned, there's no reason that Milwaukee shouldn't be able to compete with other arty mid-sized cities like Portland, Nashville and Austin for top talent. "The Midwest is a great place to live and work. Why not build a career here?" she says.

One of her program fellows, Ben Balcom, has been doing just that since he left Chicagoland about a decade ago to study film at UW-Milwaukee. Now he works as a technical director for Milwaukee Film and an adjunct professor at UWM while also maintaining an active creative practice. Balcom says he's fallen in love with the city, which he considers small enough to comfortably navigate but large enough to support both commercial and experimental projects.

"Milwaukee has always struck me, in the best way possible, as a city of weirdos. I hope there will always be room for people who are questioning the dominant paradigm and experimenting," he says. "There's a thriving, emerging conceptual art community here fueled largely by young people, which is exciting."

Fellowship.art isn't the only creative accelerator that gener8tor oversees. The company has also partnered with 88Nine Radio Milwaukee on Backline, a program for musicians. Glenn Kleiman, 88Nine's executive director, hopes that the accelerator will make Milwaukee a more appealing city for young people, even those who aren't necessarily interested in a career in the cultural sector. "We know that cities are in competition with each other for young talent, especially with unemployment being low, and it's been demonstrated that a vibrant music scene is an attractor," he says. "By helping these artists, we're hoping that there'll be a halo effect for the city, and more young people will come here and help our companies grow."

In this sense, he believes that as the city grows culturally, it will also grow economically.

When 88Nine put on an event to showcase the talents of its first Backline recipients late last year, hundreds of people packed the ground floor of the organization's headquarters. Some came because they were friends of the fellows, or musicians themselves. But many more showed up because they were interested. Interested in hearing live music. Interested in meeting other like-minded locals. Interested in being a part of the city's art scene.

Like the Saint Kate unveiling – which took place that same week – the event drove home the idea that Milwaukee may be ready to shake off its reputation as a manufacturing town whose main interest in culture is the yeast in its beer.

The city has had a good art scene for decades, and it could be on the cusp of greatness. Maybe it's time to let the rest of the world know. ■

