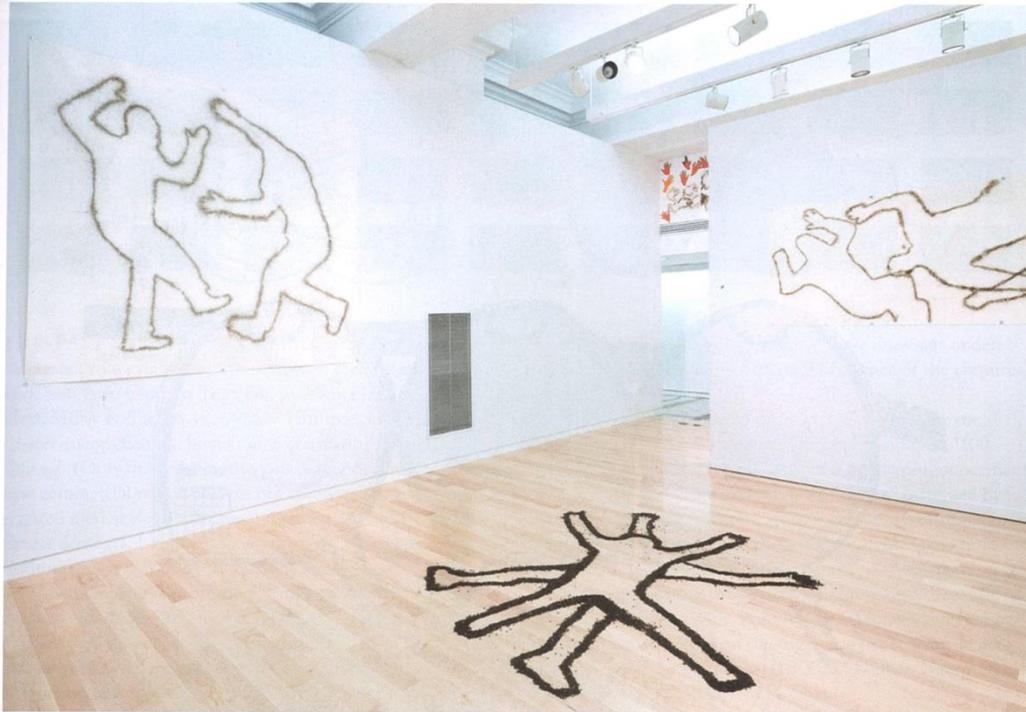


Grabner, Michelle, "The People's Palace," *Art in America*, October 2014.

ATLAS CHICAGO



View of Miller & Shellabarger's show "Again Gone," 2014, showing two gunpowder residue drawings and, on floor, a sunflower seed drawing; at the Chicago Cultural Center. Courtesy Western Exhibitions, Chicago. Photo James Prinz.

The People's Palace

by Michelle Grabner

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY got its name in 1851, when six Chicago businessmen and three Methodist ministers decided to establish a university to serve America's remote Northwest Territory. I learned this fact from longtime Chicago art critic James Yood, who was teaching a graduate seminar that I attended at NU in the early '90s. He evoked this geographical history not as a point of school pride but because he was developing an idiosyncratic historical context for the Chicago Imagists and their fantastical imagination, which emerged in the 1960s independent of the influences of New York City.

More than 160 years after NU's founding, this once far-off region is now part of America's immense heartland, sometimes haughtily dismissed by our coastal compatriots as fly-over country. Chicago, the Midwest's largest metropolis, is a city that grew inconceivably fast at its inception, burned down in 1871 and caught the world's attention in 1893, when it hosted the Columbian Exposition. The city's 20th century was equally dynamic, shaped as much by progressive social values as by a notoriously corrupt political

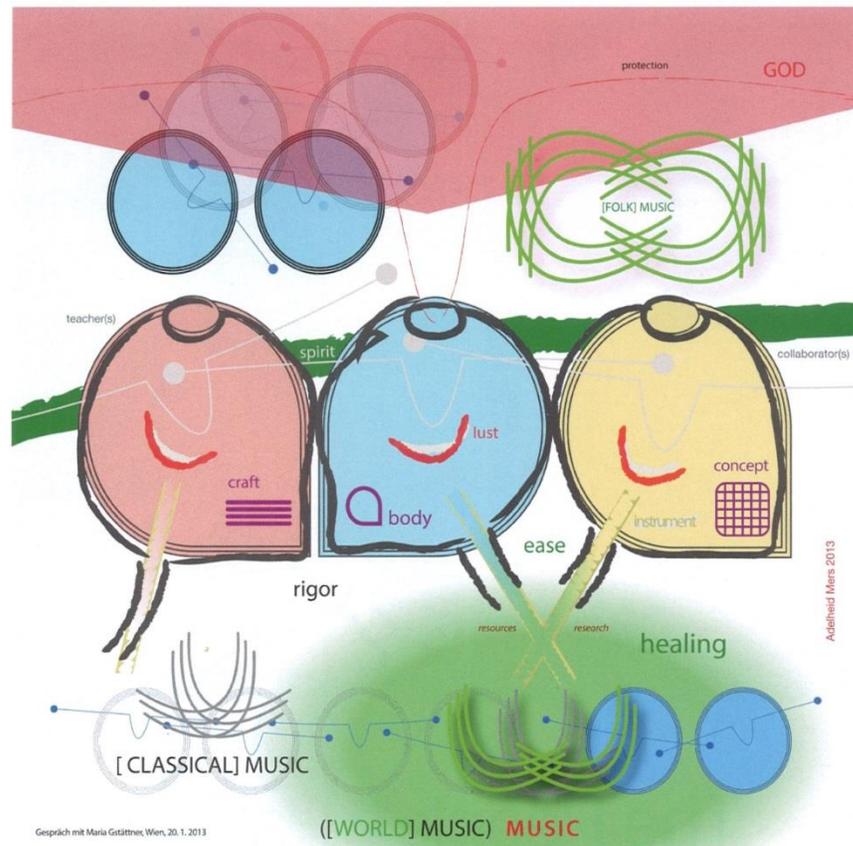
system and rampant crime. But despite its complex history (influenced by both the Great Migration from the American South and massive immigration from abroad), its current population of 2.7 million, its extraordinary skyline and roster of famed architects (Sullivan, Wright, Mies et al.), and its endless gridded sprawl, Chicago is still a town. And when it comes to the visual arts, it is a small town at that.

When I say "small," I don't mean to downplay the untold number of artists who call Chicago and vicinity home, or to neglect the city's many MFA programs, galleries and cultural institutions (which, in recent years, have been importing East Coast and European talent in bulk). Instead, I want to highlight the scant number of artworks and art-related texts generated in Chicago that now circulate fluidly via the global market and curatorial/critical networks. In other words, mobility is attained by only a select few midwestern figures and works—a fact with large repercussions. As Lane Relyea, chair of Northwestern's department of art theory and practice, observes in his recent book *Your Everyday Art World*:

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Sabina Ott: here and there and pink melon joy," at the Chicago Cultural Center, through Jan. 4, 2015.

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Adelheid Mers:
*Conversation with
Maria Gstättnr,
Vienna, 2012-13,*
inkjet and vitreous
enamel on steel,
4 feet square.
Courtesy the artist.



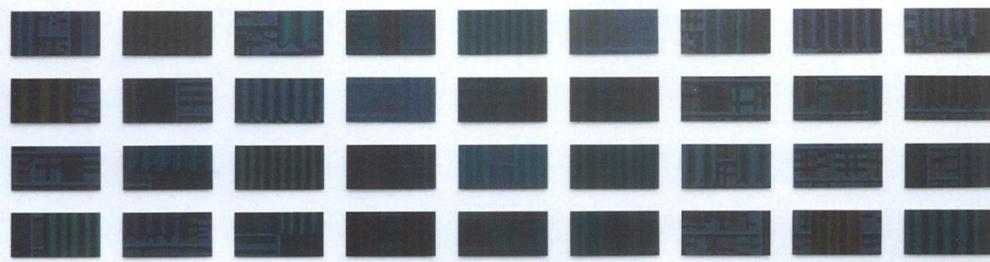
Hierarchies have been realigned, and those without the time, money, and institutional backing to travel constantly are finding it next to impossible to join the elite who can experience the development of today's most important careers and bodies of work firsthand and in the flesh, and thereby talk about it comprehensively, with authority.

Contrasting successful cultural nomads with other, more rooted artists, Relyea claims that "the hierarchy is not between this city and others, between New Yorkers and the rest." But I believe he is wrong about that. Place matters. Chicago is not a "second," inferior cultural city but a distinct and fiercely independent town, complete with its own economies, institutions and critical criteria. The venue that arguably best embodies this cultural distinctness is the Chicago Cultural Center (CCC). Located in the Loop just north of the Art Institute, it occupies a Beaux-Arts building that was Chicago's first central public library. Built in 1897, the structure sports a Tiffany dome 38 feet in diameter. In

1991, Mayor Richard M. Daley declared the facility a free museum and cultural hub, a "People's Palace."

Many area artists yearn—albeit secretly—for an invitation to exhibit at the esteemed 100-year-old Renaissance Society, at the University of Chicago. No institution in the city provides greater international exposure or a quicker boost to one's art world standing and mobility. Yet artists have a better shot at winning the Illinois State Lottery than at receiving a call from the Ren. (No local artist has a solo show scheduled there in the 2014-15 season.)

On the other hand, the Cultural Center, with vastly more exhibition space (21,300 square feet) and an artist residency program, is committed to presenting a *mélange* of Chicago-made works. With some parallels to European *kunsthallen*, it also boasts a strong commitment to community education. As a city-administered institution, the CCC is tied to a lumbering bureaucracy that impedes any excessive individual power—a welcome state of affairs, given the perverse and ever-growing tendency of curators and administrators to overshadow artists and their endeavors.



Matthew Girson:
*The Painter's Other
Library 1, 2, 3,*
2013-14, oil on
aluminum, 36
panels, each 16 by
32 inches. Courtesy
the artist.

THIS PAST SUMMER the Cultural Center mounted four concurrent solo exhibitions by artists who each have a long work history in Chicago. Together, the shows by Adelheid Mers, Miller & Shellabarger, Shane Huffman, and Matthew Girson exemplified the broad range of artistic production in Chicago. (Only the collaborative pair Miller & Shellabarger have commercial representation.) In addition, these shows engaged myriad viewers far more representative of Chicago's diverse demographics than those who pass between the Art Institute's regal pair of lions down the street.

Adelheid Mers's exhibition "Enter the Matrix" featured a series of digitally produced diagrams mapping the jumbled interrelationships that facilitate artistic influence. With a narrow yet seductive vocabulary of info-graphics, these drawings organize words, colors and shapes into compositional symmetries. Employing a stock three-line matrix, Mers tracks contrasting, wryly labeled impulses such as "makers pleasure" and "makers new experience," or "analyze" and "reflect."

Miller & Shellabarger are also beguiled by contours and changes. Their exhibition "Again Gone," installed in the gallery next to Mers's, comprised in-situ floor drawings and large-scale works on paper, all featuring various outlines of their two male bodies. Delineated in gunpowder or black oil sunflower seeds—materials that get consumed by natural

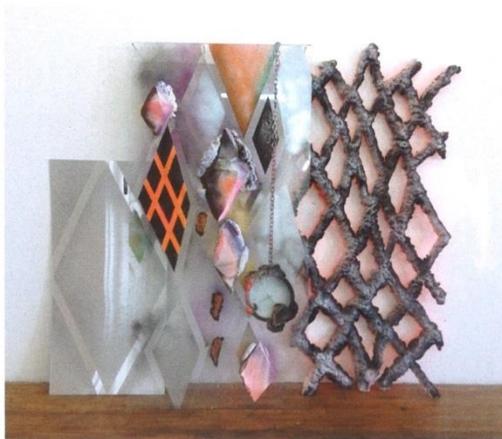
processes (either fire or ingestion)—these drawings underscore the transformations and impermanence of the corporeal world.

In a text that appeared on the CCC website, Shane Huffman introduced his exhibition of photographs, "100 100s on the One and a Half," with the poetic pronouncement "Shane Huffman is swimming to the Moon." Intrigued by sweeping theories of cosmic order and mystery, Huffman uses photography to investigate the nature of light, space-time and movement. In one instance, heavily processed abstract images are juxtaposed with a baby's head emerging into the world from his mother's vagina. A series of text images, created by handwriting with light on photographic paper, avow beliefs such as "LAW: Impermanent," "FACT: Human Interpretation" and "TRUTH: Unrecognizable."

Matthew Girson's "The Painter's Other Library," sparsely displayed in three large galleries on the center's second floor, presented impeccable yet barely perceptible images of books, shelves and the CCC interior. In these darkly painted Reinhardt-esque compositions, the line between abstraction and representation is tenuous. The austerity of the installation, the massive weight of the black velvet curtains that frame the galleries' two-story windows, and a single-channel video titled *Allegory, Allegory, Part 2* (2014), depicting a Nazi bonfire, implicitly questioned the relationship between art and any ideology—whether aesthetic or political—that seeks to limit knowledge and control enlightenment.

At present, the Chicago Cultural Center is showing three site-specific installations by Sabina Ott, who, in addition to exhibiting widely, teaches at the city's Columbia College and runs the outdoor invitational site Terrain Exhibitions, on the grounds of her suburban Oak Park home. This curatorial choice is again exemplary. The CCC sometimes hosts national and even global exhibitions, such as the international Chicago Architecture Biennial, to be co-organized next year by the city and the Graham Foundation. But the Cultural Center primarily—and unabashedly—embraces work produced in the Chicago area. If more regional cities made a major commitment to providing free-to-the-public cultural facilities and programs, perhaps new understandings of mobility and authority would unfold on the contemporary art scene. ○

Sabina Ott: *all this
which is a system,
which has feeling,*
2013, acrylic
mirror, plexiglass,
spray enamel,
acrylic paint, metal
chain, clock and
spray foam, 72 by
96 by 12 inches.
Courtesy the artist.



Atlas is a rotating series of columns by writers from Chicago, Cairo and Bangkok.