

# The Midwest Art Quarterly

Est. St. Louis, Missouri, 2022

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Volume II

July-September, 2024

Issue 3

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Editorial: What Could Regional Art Histories Be? p. 1

## Reviews

Bruno David Gallery and The Columbia Foundation for Visual Art  
*Leslie Laskey: Woodcuts* p. 3

Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis  
*Great Rivers Biennial*  
*Basil Kincaid* p. 4  
*Ronald Young* p. 5  
*Saj Issa* p. 6

Cunst Gallery  
*Alex Evets: Missouri — As It Truly Is* p. 7

Laumeier Sculpture Park  
*Monika Weiss: Metamorphosis (Sound Sculpture)* p. 8

NON STNDRD  
*Aimée Beaubien: Hold Tight* p. 9  
*Jeff Robinson: Try and Again* p. 9  
*Joe Devera: The Center Never Holds* p. 9

Pulitzer Arts Foundation  
*Scott Burton: Shape Shift* p. 10

Saint Louis Art Museum  
*The Work of Art: The Federal Art Project, 1935-1943* p. 11

William Shearburn Gallery  
*Tom Friedman: 6S, 5P, 1P, 1C and 1V* p. 12

## Views

Bartolomeo Manfredi. *Apollo and Marsyas*. 1616-1620. p. 13  
Studio Gang (Jeanne Gang). *One Hundred*. 2020. p. 14  
Adler & Sullivan (Louis Sullivan). *Wainwright Building*. 1891. p. 15

“I have always felt nervous about artists, but in my modest way I am a believer in democracy.”

—A Mother

## Editorial: What Could Regional Art Histories Be?

Artistic quality has to do with history. There's a sense in which it *is* history, or else like a maquette or a model of history. We determine it as individuals each time we discern it (or its lack) in a work of art, while simultaneously it determines the outer bounds of what it is possible for us to experience within any particular aesthetic situation. Perhaps more accurately, quality is not determinative of experience, but *is itself* the determination of the limitations on — of our very capacity for — experience. When we cast judgment, we are admitting, contradictorily and all at once: “There is an aspect of what I am feeling that has been made for me, that I can't control,” and: “My feelings are mine, I make them — I'm making them now.” Quality is what we call the notion, given to us by a work of art, that our very senses are both binding and mutable, subjective as well as objective. Like history in microcosm, artistic quality bears on us unavoidably all the while it is transformed by our participation in it. It focalizes the past and represents it to us as something that must be dealt with, overcome, in the present.

This is a highly abstract lead-up to a fairly concrete point I'd like to make. The point is this: that the thing which MAQ has set out to theorize and to tentatively enact — regionalism, a potential mode of making and considering art for after the Contemporary — has a history problem. Namely, there are few to no narratives about recent artistic production in the provinces in which current artists, electing to work outside the pull of Contemporary Art's metropolitan academicism, could ground their own practices. There are no endemic histories against which these artists could struggle and within which they could find shared terms for form and value that feel both binding and mutable. By this I don't mean to complain that historical Regionalism or other scattered American modernisms have been neglected, but rather that, since the advent of the Contemporary around fifty years ago, we have attenuated our interest in regional practices that don't conform to that Contemporary model of circulation and valuation. This has led, in turn, to the attenuation of those practices themselves.

While art has, throughout the Contemporary period, been continually getting made in cities like St. Louis — art, indeed, of occasional serious value — there has been a lack of effort put in by scholars and institutions to present cogent stories about this sub-Contemporary regional activity. This has left us with the sense that the provinces for a half century or more have been wastelands of creativity. No wonder our current artists are compelled to conform to exogenous Contemporary styles or else to give up making altogether: they have been offered no models for how, at any sort of remove from the global artworld, artistic ideas might self-sustain and assert their own relationship to quality.

Since I came to St. Louis in 2021, I've seen five shows of recently historical art from this city. I don't know of any others that I missed, but I can't be sure. If I did catch everything, that's a paltry 1½ airings *per annum* of this city's heritage in the visual arts. All five of these shows were solo exhibitions of painters or printmakers who worked here in or after the midcentury; all of them except one were somewhere between good and great. Ernestine Betsberg, whose work was up at Philip Slein this Spring, wasn't much better than any Sunday painter, but Jerry Wilkerson (DCT), Leslie

Laskey (Bruno David), John Bjerklie (French Curve), and Oliver Lee Jackson (SLAM) were all, in their own and sometimes humble ways, challenging, rewarding artists of whom St. Louis ought to be proud, and from whom its current artists could derive inspiration and learn. But what kind of milieu did these people work in? What artists were they sharing ideas and competing with? How did they contend with their provincialism, and in what ways did their separation from the artworld's centers inflect their art? We won't know until work has been done to present an encompassing historical argument about artistic production in this town.

You'll notice, too, that only one of these five shows happened at a major museum, and that was for an artist who'd already been legitimized through a solo exhibition at DC's National Gallery of Art (Jackson). Provincial institutions, in other words, take their provincialism to be a stain rather than a source of opportunity. Staffed by expats from cultural centers, major museums in the provinces seek extrinsic legitimation by aping the curatorial styles and intellectual priorities of more prestigious institutions elsewhere. (That's where the money is.) All the while, local histories of art — let alone a "local history of art" — are ignored completely. Such histories would seem minor or unintelligible to (say) a MoMA curator, but could potentially galvanize local artists' sense of their shared trajectory. Instead, provincial institutions tend to reaffirm how negligible the perspectives of currently practicing provincial artists really are within the grand scheme of current art: "Make your name elsewhere and we'll give you a show," they seem to say, "but we are incapable of cultivating taste here at home."

This, I think, is a collective abrogation of our museums' chief responsibility: to provide the artists who frequent them with tools for their aesthetic cultivation. There is a near-complete absence of narratives about regional art history in our regional institutions. (And again, I'm not talking about George Bingham or Grant Wood — I'm talking about the last fifty years.) This gives artists the sense that, in the provinces, the heights of artistic greatness are geographically out of reach. This is simply not the case.

Or rather, it *is* the case in the context of Contemporary Art, which demands that artists everywhere flatten their work in conformity to a style (actually, to a stylistic absence of style) that is globally legible. Artists here can and do succeed on those terms, but it means avoiding the development of locally specific forms and modes of making. Provincial art, as MAQ has been arguing, could assert its quality against the Contemporary by doing just this: cloistering itself as a means of differentiation, of cultivating endogenous rather than exogenous rubrics for its own success. But to do so would necessitate reworking a regionally specific understanding of art's history — not lionizing local artists for the sole sake of asserting localism, but mining the lineages of art practices from the past that have asserted themselves against the crushing weight of Contemporary priorities.

—T.S.

## Bruno David Gallery and The Columbia Foundation for Visual Art

*Leslie Laskey: Woodcuts*

July 13-December 14



Photo by Troy Sherman.

Prints are undervalued among artistic mediums, woodcuts are undervalued among prints, and St. Louis is undervalued among cities. So it fits that one of the true doyens of art in this town (who died a few years ago just shy of 100) would have toiled for decades with a medium that almost actively rebuffs recognition, and which is so little understood for what it has offered — and could continue to offer — modern artists.

This exhibition contains maybe 100 prints made over decades and decades by Laskey, who taught design at WashU for much of his life. The show is densely hung salon-style; there seems to have been little culling or selection; and many of the frames look haggard or poorly chosen for the works they contain. Given, however, that it's such a large airing of such quality work, these problems are easy to get over, maybe even a bit charming: this is less an exhibition proper than it is the opening-up of an important archive. As such, it presents an opportunity to observe, with little curatorial mediation, the movements of one man's voluble artistic mind over the course of his whole career. This should be of interest to anyone curious about how and why we make art, and in particular how and why we make it in towns where no one pays attention.

Laskey toed a line that few abstract woodblock printmakers can toe: the line that separates thorough engagement with such a haptic and surface-y medium from indulgence in the superficial sexinesses that attend pressing wood to paper. The dryness and the layering of his colors, the vagaries of grain, the heft of shapes that you necessarily get from gouging a block of wood — these are all aspects of the medium that smaller artists turn into so many fetishes. Laskey, however, made them assets. The surety of his arrangements anchors the tenuousness with which they seem to hold to the paper they're printed on.

—T.S.

## Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

*Great Rivers Biennial — Basil Kincaid*

September 6-February 9



Photo by Troy Sherman.

In an artist talk during this exhibition's opening, Kincaid stated that St. Louis "was a great place to make art," not only because of the city's community, but also because of the city's determination — a determination borne from a scarcity of means and opportunity. I agree with Kincaid. I am unabashedly sentimental about the art that is made, that grows, in my hometown.

Kincaid's art itself is something grand to behold. His quilts are monumental odes to memory, connection, and community. In each quilt, traditional Ashanti Kente textiles are joined with fabrics gifted by friends and family. Alongside the multitude of fabrics, Kincaid weaves embroidery, appliqué, beading, and other embellishments. The works' details, their swirls of color, allow me to remember the quilts made by a line of grandmothers, great-grandmothers, and great-great-grandmothers that laid on the beds of my childhood. Some art turns away from you; it does not open itself up to love. In contrast, Kincaid's work exists for bodies and beds — the beating hearts of you and those you love.

In *You Can't Get To It Without Giving To It*, yellow diamond glints of star puncture a field of pink and purple fabric. A Kente cloth halo of deep greens, purples, golds, and reds wraps around a group of figures outlined in vibrant shades of lilac and glassy blues. The voluptuous, almost undulating, silhouettes of each figure appear shy against the quilt's multitude of patterns and colors. But look carefully, look closely, and soon you'll see the friendly curves of heads and fingers, torsos and chests. These are curves that welcome you and wrap you within a warm embrace.

—A.L.

## Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

*Great Rivers Biennial* — Ronald Young

September 6-February 9



Photo by Troy Sherman.

Around a decade ago, I worked at the Northside Workshop, a non-profit in St. Louis. The first time I was in the Workshop's community garden, while I was picking up loose or errant nails near the peripheries of our planting, I was struck by a presence, a breathing "hereness," that was reverberating around me. This memory comes to my mind when I look upon Ronald Young's work, because the wood, the bricks, the tools, and the rusted nails he finds around St. Louis and incorporates into his sculptures were born from the same environment that opened that same presence within me.

Born is the wrong word here, because the work that Young does is the work of re-discovery. In *Gatekeeper*, for instance, a weathervane finds new life as the tail, legs, and spine of a sculptural form that resembles a hippo. Nails form the creature's short mane and fill its mouth, open and captured in a majestic roar. Young's *Totem Pole* sculptures are situated in patches of dirt, in reference to the tradition of Central and West African yard shows, in which sculptures made of discarded items are installed outside the home.

Young sources materials like wood and rope, chains and nails, scarred wood and rusted tools, from St. Louis buildings and lots, empty or abandoned. In this process there is a moment of revelation. We viewers learn something formerly ineffable about the spirit, the "hereness," of this city, this place. This moment of knowing, of giving new life and new sight, gifts us access to a much older way of being and moving through the world. To know takes time.

—A.L.

## Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

*Great Rivers Biennial* — Saj Issa

September 6-February 9



Photo by Troy Sherman.

In the exhibition text for Issa's video *Plein Air Performance*, we learn that the artist's day painting outside near her family's home in the hills of Beitin, Palestine was cut short. An IDF caravan arrived at the village's entrance and Issa, understandably, no longer felt safe outside. We watch the video in a state of tension; we wait for the moment when the paintbrush pauses and the artist removes herself and her easel from the frame. That anxiety — the fear you feel for the artist — is hard to shake when moving throughout Issa's work. The tender sense of home Issa imparts through vibrant color, naturalistic form, and lush composition feels perilously under threat, a cherished, fragile thing in a world filled with injustice.

This is not to assert that Issa's Palestinian home and heritage, her sense of family and memory, are delicate. Rather, I want to position this fragility, this sensation of holding your breath, as a way of seeing, of looking. Look at the shock of red petals against saturated fields of bright golden ochre in Issa's paintings of poppies. The petals drip, red rains down from each flower. It feels too easy to liken Issa's brush strokes here to blood — too brutish, too simple. Maybe these poppies (one of Palestine's national flowers) are bleeding, but I also see them weeping. The scarlet drips see, to capture a moment of breakage, of that perilous in-between state of being here but also elsewhere, of holding together memories and homes under trembling circumstances.

History too, the quotidian and grand, is subject to and the subject of our shared gazes. From small scenes of home, to still-lives of flowers, to the history of Mediterranean earthenware forms, Issa has a vested interest in asking, "Do you know where you come from?" and, "Do you know how precious that place can be?"

—A.L.



## Cunst Gallery

Alex Evets: *Missouri — As It Truly Is*

July 13-September 14



Photo by Troy Sherman.

I'll probably keep whining for as long as MAQ's a thing that regional art doesn't need to focus on esoteric local shit to differentiate itself from art in other places. But criticism loses everything it's got when it fails to respond to experience, and my experience tells me that the two best shows by St. Louis artists I've seen in the past year have been small-minded, guileless ditties about how strange Missouri is. One of these shows was Brittany Mosier's *Mark Twain Cave Rave*. This was the other.

Evets' conceit was, "What if stuff in Missouri were shaped like Missouri?" So, he made dioramas decked with Missouri-shaped stuff, such as truck beds, houses, airplanes, and flags. Some of these he placed on top of handmade, yellow-painted stands, installed on and around which were little odds and ends. Canvases with embossed sans-serif text announced that Missouri is full of items with a Show-Me shape, but they neglected to explain why. This all amounted to a joke about flyover myopia: there's a sort of cartoony bliss to contorting your worldview till it only accommodates one thing.

A big part of why the show worked was nuts-and-bolts: Evets is an exceptionally talented maker, plus he has a rare sense for how to get disparate types of objects to come together as a formal whole. The pervading yellow palette helped him accomplish this, as did a rhyme between the slight protrusion of screwheads all over his dioramas and the way he sprinkled tchotchkes throughout the gallery. Basically, Evets' exhibition is a bunch of smart objects smartly installed.

But for MAQ's purposes it's more than that, too — it's among the few shows I've seen in St. Louis that's made me feel like I was seeing something that only could've been seen *here*. A lot of this came from the cheeky Missouri content, of course, but not all of it. It seems like Evets has used his provincialism to almost completely sidestep the dumb seriousness of much Contemporary art.

—T.S.

## Laumeier Sculpture Park

Monika Weiss: *Metamorphosis (Sound Sculpture)*

August 24-December 15



Photo by Troy Sherman.

Like Cold War vestiges, two steel columns emit a solemn composition in the woods. Their industrial shapes vaguely mimic human dimensions. Schoenberg always compared music to a gas, and these steampipe forms offgas a long-lost modern composition, as if from deep within a Stalinist bunker or some forgotten graveyard of culture.

Lasting roughly 30 minutes, Weiss's composition is austere and ethereal, which fails to manifest the dirge (an ancient Greek form) it's meant to. But in *critically failing*, Weiss touches on the complicated problem of art's self-distancing from ritual in the modern world — terrible because we've lost the functional magic of art, progressive because we're forced to imagine new modes of representation adequate to our modern reality's alienated feelings. For well over a century, culture has been unable to conjure forms capable of transforming our suffering. Instead, modern art offers something like placeholder forms. Like Penderecki's *Tbrenody for the Victims of Hiroshima*, Weiss's dirge occupies yet another placeholder for suffering. The power of her composition is mysterious and its meaning vague, as though it is yet to be determined. Certainly, women aren't out there in the woods wailing and tearing at their skin like our ancient ancestors supposedly did. What, then, is a dirge *for us*?

For many ambitious artists, the answer is often: "austerity." Contemporary music is insufficient in its assumption that depth of spirit can be expressed by simply doing less. Can severity truly access our profoundest emotional turmoil, let alone transform it? Not really. But historically speaking, this is a failure of form: the crisis of manifesting a literally life-changing form has been a problem since Beethoven wrote the *Missa solemnis*, and continues up through Celan's post-Auschwitz poetry. There is probably something objective about music's need for self-alienation in our era. But until artists are capable of transcending austerity, we will be compelled by so many disembodied voices haunting the forests of culture.

—B.S.

## NON STNDRD

*Aimée Beaubien: Hold Tight*

*Jeff Robinson: Try and Again*

*Joe DeVera: The Center Never Holds*

September 7-October 19



Photo by Troy Sherman.

Beaubien’s exhibition is what you would get if you thought the problem with Duchamp’s famous twine installation was that it didn’t have enough “form,” which was not the problem with Duchamp’s famous twine installation. It’s certainly lazy to bring up those “sixteen miles of string” in relation to this piece, but it’s lazier to fill a room with rope and call it art. It seems that the purpose of Beaubien’s colors, plus all the chunks of wood hanging from her cords, is to provide the appearance of compositional intent to an arrangement that is overwhelmingly chaotic and disordered. Chaos and disorder, however, can be aesthetically productive.

Robinson’s show has been installed in a way that makes good on the precise formal relations between individual works, emphasizing simultaneously the immanent qualities of each art object and the overall configuration of the space they’ve been arranged within. There are patchwork relief sculptures that mostly work like paintings, as well as several notched-out shapely sticks. The former demonstrate that Robinson’s got a nose for how a well-placed color can exacerbate tensions between the conflicting material qualities of various juxtaposed surfaces. The latter were carved with a respectable sense of rhythm. In general, however, there’s a cleanness to Robinson’s execution that undercuts the frankness of his configurations. Some bird shit had found its way onto one of his stick sculptures, making it work much better artistically. Trust me when I say that that’s not an insult — just an observation about how this artist might benefit from admitting more crassness and contingency into his method.

In addition to these two installations, DeVera contributed a single large assemblage. Amalgams of trash such as this do not deserve to be burdened with as much significance as the artist has tried to drape over his sculpture.

—T.S.

## Pulitzer Arts Foundation

*Scott Burton: Shape Shift*

September 6-February 2



Photo by Troy Sherman

Scott Burton was an armchair artist in every sense of the term. With his pseudo-minimalist furniture sculptures, he asked: “Are Brancusi’s sculptures less interesting than the pedestals they rest on?” The answer is obviously: “No.” Burton answered: “Yes.” As if blinded by the continuous newness of the modern artwork, Burton shied away from Brancusi’s gleaming gold, only able to perceive art on its peripheries.

From the seventies on, Burton made a career exploiting the “idea” that furniture (tables, chairs, pedestals) can be art. Inherently pedantic, as everything in the modern world is aesthetic to some degree. What’s crucial is what kind of experience something offers; Burton’s experiences are kitsch. To be sure, there are smart formal experiments — one object is a single sheet of steel, cut and folded to form a chair; the marble slabs are impeccably hewn, cutting sharp profiles with tasteful color choices. I’d happily live with this furniture, but as artworks they have an obtuse, academic aspect that great art transcends. Cleverness might mildly entertain, but it is not cleverness that moves the soul.

Burton wasn’t “wrong” to see art in Brancusi’s pedestals — they are very artful components — but his obsession with them shows an inability to confront art history. This sort of evasion — artistic cowardice masked as “subversion” — rendered conceptualism a strange expression of kitsch transposed into high-brow culture. Perhaps the greatest blunder of such art has been its presumption that an artwork must be basic to be universal. In truth, even the uninitiated seek to be *challenged* when they enter museums. Failures in this regard have a paradoxically anti-social character. We are all mired in myriad forms of aesthetic experiences throughout our long modern days. Art should not reaffirm our mundane existences, but raise our experiences to a more acutely meaningful, even transformative level.

—B.S.

## Saint Louis Art Museum

*The Work of Art: The Federal Art Project, 1935-1943*

August 2-April 13



Photo by Troy Sherman.

*The Work of Art* focuses on the Federal Art Project, a Depression-era social program that gave work to artists and funded community arts education. By paying due attention to where the work was made, the exhibition identifies regional character and credits the peer and mentorship networks behind an artist's signature. The artwork is presented with details of the funding structures that undergirded it: the exhibition showcases the artist as laborer, not as arch-individual.

Wall texts broadcast that many of the artists identified with their working-class subjects. This claim is reinforced by a clear agreement between “form” and “content” in much of the art: by using a solid mass of color to depict a group of defiant strikers, for instance, an artist might have implied that they saw themselves as part of that same collective. Three prints compress the narrative ambition of murals onto a lithograph stone: *Flood* by Boris Gorelick; *Via Northwestern* by Ida Abelman; *Beacons of Defense* by Raymond Steth. They read cinematically — disaster film, travelogue, propagandistic wartime documentary — and each showcases the political, technical, and stylistic heights of FAP printmaking.

One wall holds fifteen figurative paintings presented in identical frames, all of which were done in Memphis in 1938. Each one deploys an idiosyncratic perspective system that pulls the viewer in and out of the picture plane at an unpredictable rhythm. It's a kaleidoscopic view of a particular place at a particular time, compiled from fifteen young students at a FAP art center.

A display case holds postcard-sized prints by students at the People's Art Center, as well as photographs of the center's classes. This exhibit ties the history of that organization — a free, racially-integrated art school in St. Louis founded in the forties as part of FAP — to the exhibition as a whole. Here, the show's national concerns taper to a consideration of where public art — and its viewers — stand today.

—P.L.

## William Shearburn Gallery

*Tom Friedman: 6S, 5P, 1P, 1C and 1V*

September 20-October 25

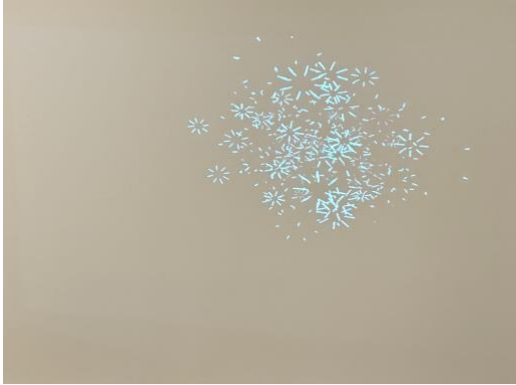


Photo by Troy Sherman.

Friedman gives you objects that start out by making you mad for how stupidly disordered they seem, until there's a magnetic flip and they become suddenly compelling (i.e., intentional-seeming). This same effect drives good works like the photographs (which are slightly edited to accentuate dumb little compositional qualities) and bad ones like a sculpture of spaghetti tossed at the wall (surprise, it's painted steel). Frequently, this flip from "formless" to "formed" occurs across artworks, as with a video of pong-like bursts on a black background whose popping shapes recur in the silhouetted portions of a photo hung elsewhere.

These sorts of inter-artwork formal relationships (which can be visual or conceptual) are crucial to Friedman's art *in toto*. His artworks are very much discrete objects, rather than continuous components of an installation, but they largely depend upon one another for their effects. Often, the crude elements of one work won't end up seeming sophisticated till you've seen them operating in a completely different register in another work. The "trick" for a show like this comes when all the disparate artworks cohere as the viewer's awareness increases of some thin but strong and consistent connection(s) between them. The 14 pieces here, however, are a bit too stylistically far-flung (and the gallery too cramped) to make their intended unlikely confluence seem either plausible or inevitable. Half the work or less might have better suited Friedman's aims.

One work, *Untitled* (8½ × 11), deserves special mention. It is a massive paper sculpture of a crumpled piece of paper. Friedman has arranged many shapes and baubles, also made of white paper, all over its surface. By thus turning the daunting blankness of a blank page into *itself* an arena for a bit of imaginative play, the piece focalizes the empty-gesture/significant-form dialectic that unfurls throughout the show as a whole.

—T.S.

Bartolomeo Manfredi. *Apollo and Marsyas*. Oil on canvas. 1616-1620.

On view at the Saint Louis Art Museum



Photo by Troy Sherman.

The Apollo and Marsyas myth touches upon core artistic problems. Marsyas was such a great musician that the gods got jealous, and Apollo flayed him after a music contest. Who won? It doesn't matter: the gods always win. The apparent moral is that human artists must never be *too* good at art, must never challenge the powers that be.

Manfredi presents an analytical profile view of Apollo and Marsyas; the composition itself is Apollonian in its order and clarity. The god is artful, surgically precise — his eye is keen as he methodically removes skin from Marsyas's arm, his undulating robe symbolic of the veil of dreams. Marsyas, no Laocoön, is not as tortured as one might expect. He seems unsurprised that Apollo is flaying him.

In Apollo's analytical gaze resides an allegory for viewing itself: the viewer as analyst. Though there was always something sadistic in the orderliness of this god — he represents a civilizing tendency — there is also, in Manfredi's painting, something potentially progressive to him. One surmises that Apollo is not jealous, but rather keen to comprehend the artistic secrets of his Dionysian enemy. In dissecting Marsyas, perhaps Apollo could glean something of the satyrs' immediate freedom which could be transposed into the dreamworlds the god creates. There, Marsyas' immediate freedoms could truly be emancipated.

Apollo is not just a stand-in for the viewer, but for the artist as well. In Manfredi's painting, the god is an allegory for the artist's role as researcher and physician. From this viewpoint, the death of Marsyas is less the vindictive punishment of a jealous god, and more a redemption of the satyr — a necessary sacrifice of the old world of immediate expression, made for the sake of living a freer life in more abstract and compelling dreamworlds. To some degree, every artist today has made this sacrifice for their art.

—B.S.



Photo by Jack Campbell.

Good architecture demands concern for its context. *One Hundred* is located at the Northeast corner of Forest Park, in the wealthy Central West End neighborhood, mere blocks from the locally known “Delmar Divide.” Gang’s building appears to have been designed without bothering to investigate this social environment.

*One Hundred’s* exterior design — seven stacked, four-story, fanlike rows atop a gray parking garage pedestal — provides some basic graphic fun... at great cost. Its gray pedestal makes any amount of meaningful street-level interaction with the building virtually impossible. This plinth, combined with the fanlike shapes above, directs eyes up, towards the sky, away from the street-level realities of the building’s location. The use of a pedestal here to elevate 28 stories of (meek) visual interest offers a metaphor for *One Hundred’s* relationship to the world around it: it is a gaudy jewel displayed for all to see, an unwitting symbol of the neighborhood’s ignorance.

The building’s apartments provide wonderful views of the city’s more picturesque East-West sites. (That is, if tenants are able to stomach the lobby’s decor, which appears to have been done by Etsy’s marketing department.) But, the overall proportions of the building prevent the vast majority of its occupants from ever having to see the racially-motivated desolation just North, the result of their neighborhood-forbear’s politics. The developer who selected Studio Gang, a poster-child of the hollow and the shiny in our era of post-postmodern architecture, has some questions to answer.

This is a classic example of design with misplaced values. The wealthy can live comfortably in Gang’s *One Hundred*, in part because their home helps them ignore troubles just around the corner. The building, however, is unlikely the work of intentional malice; instead, it’s an instance of “the banality of evil” continuing its work in architecture.

—J.C.





Photo by Troy Sherman.

The State of Missouri recently sold the Wainwright Building. Their abandonment of this historic structure in downtown St. Louis should dispel the myth that political conservatism gives a damn about cultural heritage. One of the city's 14 National Historic Landmarks, the building still holds all the measures of significance — government, expert, public — that caused Missouri to rescue it from oblivion in the late 1970s. Such dedication to patrimony, however, is anathema to today's Republicans, whose sectarian obsessions amount to self-referential nihilism.

Perhaps the Wainwright Building is now set free. Purchased by Greater St. Louis, Inc., at least it will not become part of the set of abandoned downtown office buildings that amounts to an open-air museum of capitalism's fickle commitment to place. Hopefully every ounce of the genius of Louis Sullivan's vision of an American architecture, liberated in both form and style, will be allowed to continue singing. The building's brilliant monochrome assembly of sandstone, common pressed brick, and exquisite terra cotta does pulsate an urgent agenda, still dazzlingly modern.

Yet, as Dell Upton has noted, the Wainwright Building's genius lies in its synthesis of "the metaphorical expression of bureaucratic work with the sense of the city as a social system of workers and consumers." There is no functional social system downtown, at least any that can be measured in what would happen on the sidewalks flanking Sullivan's masterpiece. Its architectural context, too, is bleak. The horrid parking garage to the east, the anemic corporate postmodern block to the south, and even the building's additions themselves (arrogant, boring boxes designed by Mitchell/Giurgola) muddle the communicative power of Sullivan's original design. The Wainwright stands as a quiet monument, not an active agent forcing the world around it to feel the impulse to change and to defy the chokehold of baleful traditions.

—M.R.A.

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# *MAQ*



Vol. II, No. 3  
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