

An Avalanche! of Innovation

Recent addition to arts scene aims to provide open-concept space



Splashes of colour and an array of abstract sculptures fill the trendy interior of Calgary's newest hub for the contemporary arts.

Housed by an age-old brick building in the heart of downtown Calgary, Avalanche! has earned a loyal following of art gurus and amateurs alike.

Founders Nate McLeod and Cassandra Paul suggest the institute's success is rooted in the space's open-minded nature and the eclectic art at any given exhibition.

"A lot of galleries are a little bit hesitant to just let an artist do whatever they want," McLeod says. "What we are really interested in is selecting artists based on their work, but not wanting them to do exactly that, [rather] letting them do what they want, in relation to the space."

The institute opened its Victoria Park location six months ago and has since programmed four successful exhibitions with hundreds of spectators at each opening.

The small space has been utilized in a number of different ways, ranging from the abstract display of sculpture in each corner to the subtle brushing of charcoal dust across its barren walls.

According to McLeod, the studio is able to cultivate diversity by encouraging artists to engage in site-specific and installation-based works. "We're more interested in showing emerging artists," Paul adds. "There are lots of galleries that show established artists, but where else can you build up your portfolio and experiment with ideas fresh out of the studio?"

Artist Sondra Meszaros, an instructor at ACAD and a past exhibitionist at Avalanche!, agrees with Paul in that the venue is unique to the community in its flexibility and evolution.

"When it was confirmed that I would be exhibiting at Avalanche! for the Calgary Biennial, I knew that Nate and Cassandra would be able to support my vision for a piece that might seem problematic in other commercial spaces," Meszaros says in an email. "They really grasp the perspective of an artist and what might be lacking in terms of opportunities."

Meszaros adds that having both studio and unconventional commercial spaces is rare in Calgary, but accommodating these two aspects of an artists practice sets Avalanche! apart from other venues.

"Avalanche! has provided an alternative to the status quo in Calgary," added Meszaros. "It isn't a conventional artist-run centre or commercial gallery. "Avalanche! has people in the community excited in a way that I have not seen since I first moved to Calgary in 2003."

The venue's most-recent exhibition entitled "I like it here. Don't you?" has been among its most unconventional to date. Artist Bogdan Cheta says that bringing his installation works to Avalanche!'s commercial space has been a rewarding experience.

"It's interesting to be commercial," Cheta says. "There is a focus on both the commercial aspect of things and the process here."

Cheta's use of everyday objects to create sculpture expands into nearly every crevasse of the compact space. The opportunity to overwhelm an area and incorporate different forms of media installments is unique to "the Avalanche! narrative," he says.

"It doesn't matter what you propose," Cheta says. "It will get done. They arrange a number of opportunities for emerging artists and I think it's interesting because that happens later on in your career, not often in the beginning."

Cheta says, although he has worked with a number of galleries since graduating from ACAD, Avalanche! is the most diverse in its overwhelming concept support and the ambitious nature of both Paul and McLeod.

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