

# HAW/CONTEMPORARY

## **Bill Haw Jr. will open contemporary art gallery in former Dolphin building**

Alice Thorson, Kansas City Star, July 5, 2013

In May, the Kansas City art world looked into the void with the news that John O'Brien's Dolphin gallery, a key component of the thriving scene, was shutting down.

Six weeks later, that void has been filled.

Haw Contemporary, a new gallery run by Kansas City native Bill Haw Jr., will occupy the Dolphin space at 1600 Liberty St. and will open its first exhibition, a group show, Sept. 13.

Haw, a businessman and art collector whose family owns the Livestock Exchange Building and other West Bottoms properties, is buying the Dolphin building.

"Everybody knows that Dolphin's closing was going to leave a big hole in Kansas City," Haw said. "I decided this is probably what I should do. I'm absorbing every piece of information I can and will push the gallery forward in a rational, businesslike fashion without sacrificing what made it great."

O'Brien's decision to close Dolphin left the Kansas City art world reeling. After opening in Westport in 1989, Dolphin relocated to the Crossroads Arts District, where the gallery evolved into an important hub for art, dialogue and socialization and represented many of the leading artists in town. In 2008, O'Brien moved the operation to the West Bottoms.

The local art scene is responding with elation to the news that Dolphin has a successor.

"We all are thrilled that Dolphin is being rethought and that (the space) will continue now as Haw Contemporary," said Julian Zugazagoitia, director/CEO of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. He and Haw are Mission Hills neighbors and have become good friends.

"It would have been unfortunate if the great momentum that O'Brien built would go dark," Zugazagoitia added. "Out of the passion and commitment that Bill Haw Jr. has gathered as a Dolphin supporter, collector and businessman, he is stepping up to embrace a destiny that is calling him to take it on."

Haw said he planned to "continue to support local artists and keep the community event atmosphere." At the same time, he said, "I want to more proactively engage and have a dialogue with collectors and deepen my relationship with them."

O'Brien, who has decided to pursue his own creative projects, initially planned to lease the West Bottoms building, which he bought and renovated into a premier exhibition space five years ago.

"I'm not sure I would have done this with another person," he said. "The potential of possibilities with Bill Haw doing this are beyond my imagination. It's something very exciting that we need in Kansas City, to

have a different eye and different viewpoint on how to run a commercial gallery.

"A lot of artists are leery of businesspeople," he added. "I consider him to have a creative mind and also a business mind, and I think that's a rare thing. He seems to be able to walk in both worlds with ease."

Haw comes to his new project with a long resume of business experience. In the mid-1990s, he founded the Emma Chase Cafe in Cottonwood Falls, Kan. Last year he teamed up with restaurateur and chef Todd Schulte on a popular hand-made soup business, Uncommon Stock. He also runs the historic Hotel Frederick in Boonville, Mo., which the family bought and restored in 2004.

Haw has spent much of his career in Japan, where he worked for six years in education, translation and interpretation after graduating from the University of Kansas in 1989. He returned to KU in 1996 to earn a master's degree in Japanese studies and then set off for San Francisco, where he founded Lexicon, an English/Japanese translation business that expanded into bilingual Web development and other services for companies in Japan.

In 2001, he took a position with the online yesasia.com company, which sells Asian entertainment products, from CDs to video games. Four years later, Amazon hired him to be director of Amazon Japan.

"Any business is about finding where the energy lives and accessing it and channeling it, whether it's a soup business, a gallery or Amazon," Haw said. "That's why it's not just 100 percent crazy for me to do an art gallery."

O'Brien thinks the seeds were planted in 2010, when Haw returned to the U.S. with his wife, Hitomi, and two children and began to meet artists and buy art at Dolphin.

"The Dolphin and John were really important parts of my life," Haw said. "Pretty close to every piece we have is from Dolphin."

But the reason for the move, he said, was to work with his father, Bill Haw Sr.

"We have diverse operations here, and we both thought it would be fun to work together. I was 45 at that time. It was really easy to come back after success on my own terms."

Haw's activities in the West Bottoms have included an ambitious effort with O'Brien and his father to attract new businesses to the south end of the area, which they rebranded the Stockyards District.

The Haw family bought the Telegram Building and worked with O'Brien to renovate it for occupancy by younger up-and-coming businesses, including Amigoni Urban Winery, the architecture firm KEM Studio and art gallery Bill Brady/KC.

"I'm excited," said Brady, a Kansas City native who established the ATM gallery in New York before opening his eponymous gallery here. "I'm glad that someone's picking up the torch. It's going to be interesting. Bill's going to run it with a different point of view. I think it will be really positive for Kansas

City and all the artists, and I think with him coming in, we'll both have a chance of finding young collectors."

Haw sees building a collector base as job one and says he plans to work with experienced collectors and also tap his family's strong network of personal and business relationships.

"My peers and my friends are at an age where their kids are growing up; financially they're feeling more freedom and reassessing what they're surrounding themselves with," he said. "There's great art you can buy for 700. That's affordable. And you can find paintings ranging from 2,000 to 45,000. There's good art at any price."

Haw says he's already at work on a national and international marketing plan.

"I want to establish reciprocal relationships," he said, "and identify galleries who line up with what we're trying to do aesthetically. I want to broaden the scope. On the selling side, that means getting our artists out and bringing in fresh art that's nationally recognized.

"In July I'm going to be in Tokyo for 10 days, and I will visit galleries and initiate discussions about reciprocal shows. There are several artists here that I think would do very well in Japan."

Eventually, Haw said, he wants to up the gallery's exposure by participating in the big art fairs; the gallery's website will also be an important component.

But initially, gallery visitors won't notice any big differences.

Artist Archie Scott Gobber has taken over O'Brien's framing business, and Dolphin Framing will continue in its present location in the building. Dolphin Printing, under Bruce Bettinger, will continue to operate on the second floor. And Dolphin staffer Emily Eddins will continue to help Haw manage shows and sales.

"Emily knows everything already," Haw said. "She has fantastic relationships with artists and collectors and incredible ideas. She's going to be a key piece in moving this forward."

Change will be incremental, in part because of Haw's plan to open for business in September.

"Starting out, I just don't want to let the wings fall off the airplane," he said. "As I meet everybody and take more time and look through the art and see if it's right, we might subtract here and there. We will be adding local, regional, national and international artists. Initially, it will skew way toward local. The trick will be identifying artists that really fit.

"I feel like a tiny twig going down a giant river," he added. "It's taken on a life of its own. Immediately, everybody had a positive reaction, and I've had an incredible outpouring of advice and offers to help from artists and collectors and people in the community."

Zugazagoitia is confident Haw can pull it off.

"I believe that his business acumen, international experience and outlook and his artistic sensitivity will allow Kansas City to continue having a space for representing local, national and international artists," he said. "Hopefully, on the horizon, his gallery will represent them at the art fairs that will bring them to the global scene. I am certain that collectors of caliber will notice even further Kansas City as an arts destination with great talent."

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