



## Art Review: Work of 72 artists, sculptors showing at Crosstown Arts

By Fredric Koepfel

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“Material Anthology,” at Crosstown Arts through Aug. 11, is the most important exhibition of local contemporary art seen in Memphis this year, and it’s difficult to conceive that there will be one equally as important between now and Dec. 31.

The occasion of the show is, sadly, the closing of Material; happily, the reason it is closing is because founder and proprietor Hamlett Dobbins was recently awarded the Rome Prize from the American Academy, and he leaves for the Eternal City in a few weeks. Thanks to Christopher Miner of Crosstown Arts for conceiving of the exhibition.

Dobbins launched Material in 2004 with a small exhibition of paintings by Melissa Dunn, necessarily small because the 41 linear feet of available wall space could not hold a great deal of art. From that beginning, Material held 103 exhibitions, some displayed for the standard three or four weeks, but the majority in the one-night-only mode — up goes the show, there’s a Friday night reception from 6 to 9, and then the show comes down. If you followed Material steadily, you got to see a lot of art, but you saw it very quickly.

Located in the storefront space of the building on Broad Avenue that Dobbins shared with his then-wife, Julie Meiman, and their two children, Material served the purpose not only of introducing the public to a dazzling array of young (or fairly young) and emerging artists, as well as established artists working outside their usual *métier*, but also as an impetus to the elevation of those four or five blocks of Broad to the beginning of a viable arts district.

The gallery at Crosstown Arts is probably 10 times the size of Material, so accommodating the work of 72 artists, including several major sculptures, looks as if it was easy, though the thousand decisions involved of course teem with complications. The two-dimensional pieces are displayed on long facing walls, hung, of necessity, salon-style yet not feeling crowded. The way that many of the works resonate with each other in terms of style, gesture, content and medium, testifies to the thought that went into the display.

Material was a vanity gallery, which means that artists paid a fee to mount exhibitions there. If you know anything about vanity presses, you know what tides of mediocrity

pour from them. Dobbins, however, was in the position of wanting to display as often as possible the highest quality work from artists who mainly did not have representation or were in school or just out of school; at the same time, he had a mortgage and property taxes and utilities to pay. It seems to me, looking back on all the exhibitions that I saw and reviewed at Material and just coming back from looking at “Material Anthology,” there was never a hint of compromise and that the gallery was a deeply personal project. Even more, Dobbins revealed fearless dedication to art that often pushed the limits of possibilities, whether in terms of creative or artistic attitudes, of the physical properties of the material used, of the outermost reaches of abstraction and expressionism.

Standing in the middle of the Crosstown Arts gallery, one has to marvel not only at the diversity represented by these 72 artists — there’s one piece by each — but at the amazingly high quality of the work and the relationships among them. To see, for example, Tad Lauritzen Wright’s goofy and exuberant “Dumpster” hanging just under Grier Edmundson’s cool and elegant untitled painting of a skyscraper thrusting into clouds, while under those is “Spiral,” a tidy, mysterious and cerebral little drawing by Peter Sculte, all adjacent to the abstractions of Sunny Montgomery, Paul Behnke and Barbara Campbell Thomas is not to feel confused but rather gratified, even filled with joy, that these seeming incommensurate efforts were brought together by the vision of one man who was fervent in his belief that Memphis was a progenitor of great art.

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### **“Material Anthology”**

At Crosstown Arts, 422 N. Cleveland, through Aug. 11. E-mail [hamlettdobbins@hotmail.com](mailto:hamlettdobbins@hotmail.com) or [emily@crosstownarts.org](mailto:emily@crosstownarts.org).



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