

15 Minutes with a Dealer: *Prospectus*

Prospectus Art Gallery remains at the heart of Chicago's Mexican Renaissance in its original location on 18th Street in Pilsen, where the gallery opened twenty years ago. CGN's Laura Miller met with director Israel Hernandez and learned about the gallery's history, its strong family ties, and its mission to support contemporary and Latin American art.

LM: Tell me about the history of Prospectus Art Gallery.

IH: I was born in Zacatecas, Mexico and came to Chicago with my family in 1972. I worked in the produce business and because of that was able to establish the gallery with my family in 1991. Prospectus was the first formal gallery in Pilsen and we've remained at our original location while watching this area change a lot over the years. I want to thank my family for their participation and the business suppliers that have made all this possible.



Why did you want to open the gallery?

I grew up in Pilsen, and this was a rough area during the '70s. My family and I wanted to create something positive to help enrich the area, particularly for the young people in the community. There are several schools near the gallery, so we always see a lot of younger people in the neighborhood and believe it's important for them to have art and creativity in their lives.

Tell me about your exhibition process.

Shows are planned about 8 months out, and we tend to deal with relevant, current topics in our choice of subject matter and show titles, i.e. economic, social, political issues. People are interested in what's happening in the world and we showcase work that addresses those hot-button topics.

We're proud to show prominent Chicago and Latino artists like Mario Castillo, Alejandro Romero, Hector Duarte, Marcos Raya. I'm in touch with a lot of Mexican artists and people from Latin America. We've also shown some of Chicago's top artists including Roger Brown, Ed Paschke, Carlos Cortez and Richard Hunt.

Are you an artist or art collector?

I did some artwork in my childhood, while in Mexico but wouldn't consider myself a practicing artist. I do collect artwork; that's something I'd like to do more of.

How would you describe the Pilsen and South Side art community?

It's growing. Historically, Pilsen was a strong artistic center before other currently known gallery districts were even formed. Unfortunately, a large number of studios in the area have been affected by commercialism. Larger building projects have taken over studio spaces, which makes it more and more difficult for artists to afford workspace. That being said, there is still a large number of artist studios, galleries and alternative spaces in the area; some offer youth and adult art classes as well as community programs to get the neighborhood involved in the arts.

We always look forward to *Pilsen Open Studios*, held each October. The event features programming in over 50 artist studios, spaces, galleries and restaurants around Pilsen. It's an exciting, busy event that draws in a lot of younger people, students, and those interested in art. We estimate around 4,000 people participated last fall.

What do you find to be the most exciting part of running the gallery?

Being able to share artwork from an unknown artist with the public. Harold Allen's '96 photography exhibition is a classic example. Allen's show was only the second in his career, following one previous exhibition at The Art Institute of Chicago in '84. Allen taught photography at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago for three decades and was 80 years old at the time of his show at Prospectus. He was very humble and not expecting much from his show during installation, but it ended up being hugely successful. The show also garnered praise from the *Chicago Tribune* art critic at the time, Alan Artner. The public's strong, positive response to Allen's work was a thrilling experience, and we feel that same excitement for our current shows and artists.



Director Israel Hernandez

What's unique about Chicago's art scene?

Art Expo's early years were game-changing for Chicago. Everyone had been eyeing New York and Europe, and this brought deserved attention to Chicago and showed the city's potential. Chicago has such a wide range of outstanding artistic programs, gallery/art spaces and museums, but it has a big problem with the lack of art criticism and regular art critics. There used to be more writing, more interest; now that is lacking.

What has been your favorite thing about Chicago's art world?

I love seeing the city's artistic history around town in the relics of murals on buildings and bridges. Sadly, many are disappearing or are in need of conservation. The city lacks a program to protect them. I remember seeing murals when I was young on my way to and from school. They had an impact on me and played a role in my opening the gallery. My brother did murals when we were younger, and I always liked and encouraged that. I also enjoy the National Museum of Mexican Art. They consistently do good work and have proper funding. We were happy to collaborate on a show with the museum in 2009.

Do you have any 2012 new year's resolutions for the gallery?

We'd like to continue supporting Latin American and other contemporary art. We believe this allows for a fusion of exciting possibilities to come. Also, we did an exhibition in Mexico a few years ago, partnering with a local business to display artwork. We'd like to do another larger exhibition like that in Mexico again.

We've established a relationship with the communications media and look to extend that into Spanish networks. We want to reach out to the Latin American business community, inviting their participation in our informative exhibitions. It's important that those in positions to support local art and cultural programs do so. After all, this is home.



Carlos Barberena, *Calavera Cañera* after *Psada*

Prospectus Art Gallery
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