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Letter from Chicago: The City's Art Scene Scrambles Senses of Scale with Homegrown Aims

BY ALEX JEN

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At Corbett vs. Dempsey, Hamid Drake and Ken Vandermark play music by Don Cherry.

COURTESY CORBETT VS DEMPSEY, CHICAGO

There is something reassuring about living in a city stretched along a lake. In Chicago, once you figure out where you are in relation to Lake Michigan, your sense of direction crystallizes. Streets snap against a grid whose point of origin is downtown at the intersection of State and Madison. Addresses increase or decrease from that center, with odd numbers on the south and east sides of the streets, and even numbers to the north and west. A longtime graphic designer who grew up here once told me that he could determine exactly where he was in the city just by looking at the addresses. That might seem mundane—and we do of course now have Google Maps—but I believe this sense of order in Chicago has a grounding effect in subtle ways that can be specific and unexpected and diffusely felt.

This past summer, I would look at the skyline from the south, from 31st Street Beach or Promontory Point, and savor the city's tall sweep, like a curtain drawn beyond the blue waters. My favorite skyscraper in the lineup is Edward Durell Stone's Aon Center, originally the Standard Oil Building—an elegant piece of milky white retro-modernism

decision was made to re-sheath the building with Mount Airy white granite. The design itself is understated: tinted windows run down the sides like fluting, and squares are barely excised from the corners, technically making a cruciform of the plan. By the time this letter goes to print, the building's checkered gray facade will be swathed in winter's cold, dense fog.

Chicago is filled with storied architecture, but shining among all the looming structures is an animated constellation of artist-run spaces of a more makeshift sort. Thanks to relatively low rent, you can find new art in old buildings here, with a daring, untethered spirit on display in storefronts, apartments, basements, and subdivided studios. Scrappy, straight-out-of-school work coexists with that by veterans of the scene, a number of whom—including Diane Simpson and Richard Hunt—seem keenly aware that they live in a city so attuned to architectural matters like detail, surface, and distance. Their work maintains an inner logic and humble consideration of how people will walk up to and experience it in space.



Chicago's artistic conversation since the 1960s, showing in galleries and university museums in the city and throughout the Midwest.

In 2010 she had a retrospective at the Chicago Cultural Center right in the Loop, just a block away from Hunt's *We Will* (2005), a soaring if awkwardly located stainless-steel sculpture that ascends outside a location of the LA Fitness gym chain. Public art is only as good as its placement, which is often out of the artist's control; fortunately, Hunt's presence is better represented by dozens of elegant, unexpected works I continue to discover across town. *Slabs of the Sunburnt West* (1975), a memorial to the poet Carl Sandburg, surfaces as a set of blunt bronze fins in a Brutalist quad at the University of Illinois Chicago, and *Scholar's Rock or Stone of Hope or Love of Bronze* (2014–20) recently anchored a survey of rippling and variously tapered sculptures that stood against the skyline on the Bluhm Family Terrace at the Art Institute of Chicago.

These are just two of the artists who have been in Chicago for the long run. You meet plenty of “lifers” here, perhaps because it's a city open to curiosity and continuation. Different generations feel both highly visible and easily approachable—Chicago is, after all, a city of teachers.



The relationship between teachers and students is ongoing in Chicago. Some students work as assistants for faculty, and it is not unusual, when the time comes, to see teachers exhibiting alongside former students—with the invitations going both ways.



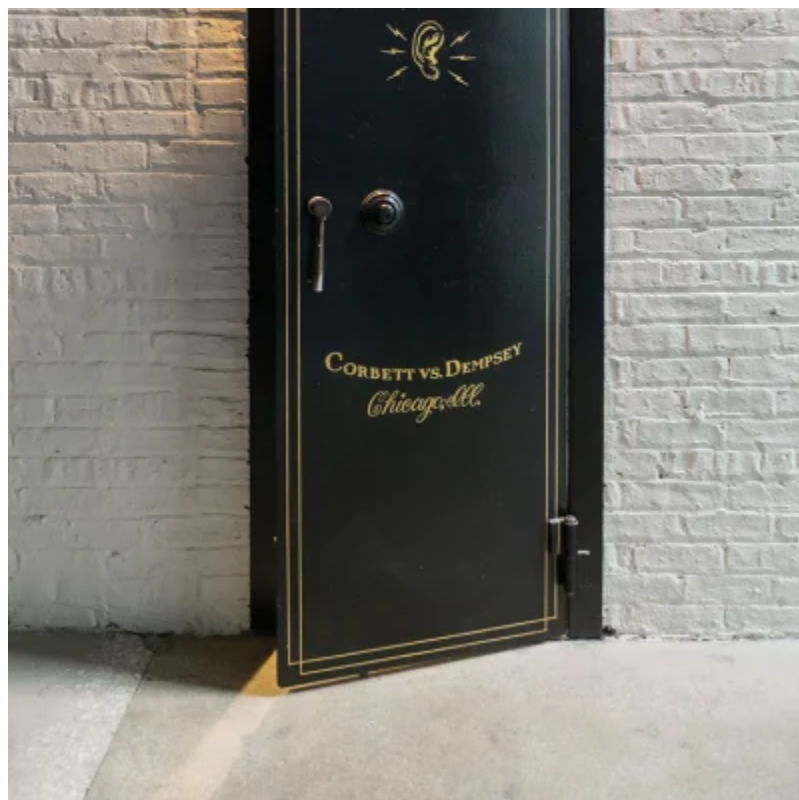
~mpson's art scene



Installation view of Anna Horvath's exhibition "Precarious Dazzle" at **Produce Model** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/produce-model/>).

PHOTO PRODUCE MODEL/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PRODUCE MODEL, CHICAGO

Influence is organic in Chicago and a conventional sense of hierarchy does not quite apply. Differences between emerging and established artists remain, but feelings of respect and friendship guide the communities that live and work here. In the fall of



Nauman's twisted 1987 video installation involving a screaming clown (held in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago) being shown in the serenity of the museum's Gallery 109, designed by Tadao Ando.



shown in neighborhoods south of the Chicago River. Ask another person and you'll get an entirely different set of spaces. But the size of it all is just perfect: always something to see, but never too much to be overwhelming. If you miss a show, you might hear about it anyway—or likely meet the artist at Skylark, the after-opening bar of choice in Pilsen.



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