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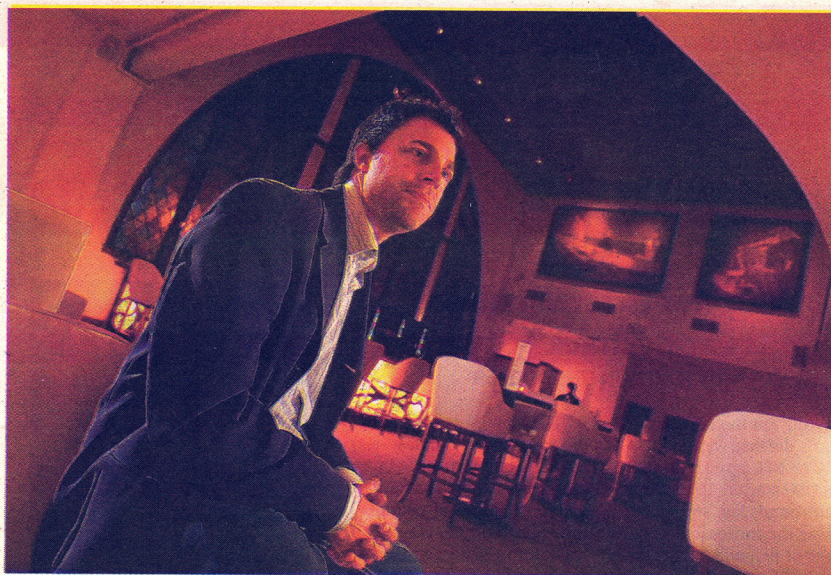
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raising the bar

BY JOHN ROSS
PHOTO BY WILL SHILLING



More than five months ago, as a 19th-century Baptist church slowly transformed into what promised to be the city's hippest spot, Tom Starker and Pam Theodotou, two of the Bar of Modern Art's three owners, asked me for help.

It's important, they said beneath the building's bare and dusty skeleton, that we show the people of Columbus that they were ready for this.

Theirs was a political statement speaking to the changing identity of Columbus and to the many issues pressed by such a venue—equal parts art gallery, nightclub, restaurant and lounge.

Would casual drinkers appreciate paintings late on a Friday night? Would art connoisseurs pay a \$10 cover to enter a gallery? Could the space, more than 23,000 square feet, sur-

vive in a big city that doesn't always see itself as one?

Since BoMA's opening October 18, the answers to these questions are just beginning to come into focus (and the kitchen has yet to open). But what stands out most brightly—and what should help maintain the prestige and intrigue necessary for survival—is the art.

"It's like naming your favorite child," joked Chad Tooker, the gallery director, about choosing his favorite work. "Beyond the aesthetics, the background makes each series special."

During the past year, Tooker has collected the paintings, photos, glass work and sculptures that now adorn the venue's three floors. He talked to *Alive* about running one of the city's most unusual galleries.

You've tried hard to be known a valid art gallery, not just a bar with paintings. Do you think serious art collectors will come here to see art?

I don't think that even hardcore art advocates, museum and gallery advocates, will be turned off by this atmosphere, as long as it's being done professionally, how I intend to do it.

I'm curating this space and operating it very much like a museum, as well as a gallery, so there are those elements that I think will help to legitimize it as a gallery. For instance, the gallery associates helping to secure the artwork, being there to educate somebody who has questions and also to potentially facilitate a sale.

This is truly a traditional art gallery. This is the tradition of the art gallery, the living art space, as opposed to what we've come to know as the modern version of the art gallery.

On the flipside, you've put a lot of stock in the hope that weekend drinkers will be interested in fine art.

I'm not naive to think that everyone who comes to BoMA to eat or drink will be interested in the art. But I hope that people will come to the space for dinner and/or drinks with no intention of paying any attention to the artwork and walk away with an appreciation of the art. I hope this space can create art enthusiasts.

The collections include many media and a wide range of local and national artists. What's the rubric for choosing the shows?

We want to remain eclectic in terms of style and media. We want to run the gamut, where you can come in at any time and see all the artistic outlets that are there.

Also, we want to keep it diverse in terms of the career level of the artists. We have artists like Dennis Stock and Mario Madiai, who are respected worldwide, and then you can go around the corner and see Daryl Warren, an emerging artist from New York City who nobody knows about here.

We thought we could nurture a new breed of art buyers and bring in the established collectors who would drop \$5,000 on a Dennis Stock photograph.

Even after a successful opening, do you consider the space a work in progress?

Maybe in some senses. One of the ideas behind the space initially was to keep it constantly changing. And that's done most obviously with the artwork. But we also plan to occasionally change out the carpet, the furniture, to keep the space always in flux.

One of the reasons that nightspots and entertainment venues such as this average a three- to five-year run is because it gets stagnant. People basically get bored with the same environment, the same people, the same music.

We fully anticipated that there would be details that people would harp on. With a facility this size and this grand, you try your hardest to make every detail extravagant and ideal. But you have to take into consideration practicality.

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