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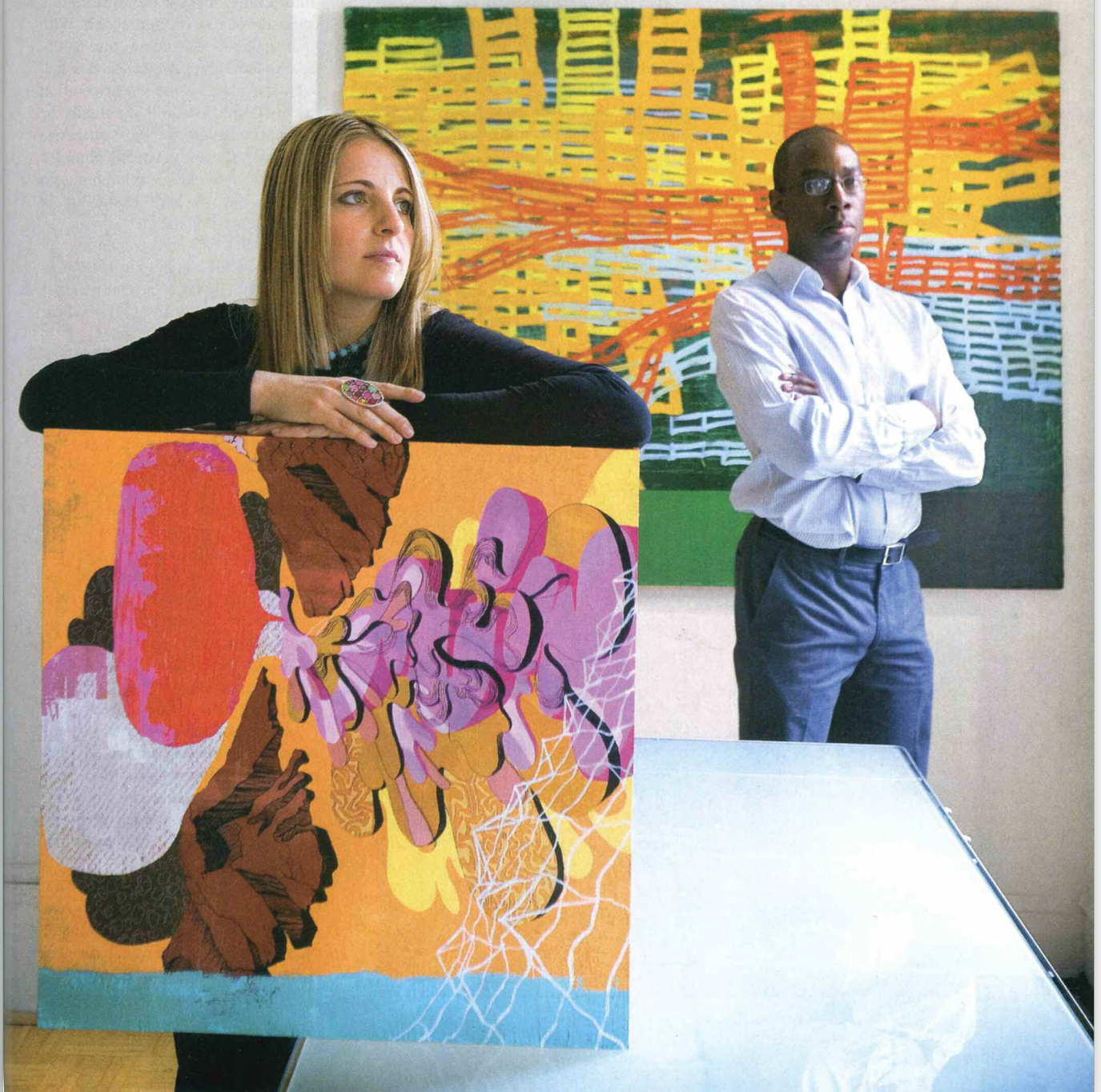
The **Philly** School

How cheap real estate, creative minds and a scrappy attitude are turning Philadelphia into a happening art town. Plus: Philly artists to keep your eye on

BY **JESSICA PRESSLER** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **RYAN DONNELL**

Rebecca Rutstein and Tim McFarlane

Rutstein, 34, and McFarlane, 40, both Philly natives, are represented by 32-year-old Bridgette Mayer's eponymous gallery, which was recently featured on *Anderson Cooper 360* as a jumping-off point for emerging artists. McFarlane says his large-scale acrylic paintings are inspired by the grids and grates of the city he grew up in: "I like to look at buildings being erected and contemplate the structures underneath, what's holding them together." Rutstein, a 2004 PEW fellow from Bala Cynwyd, is one of 55 artists of varying stripes who work out of the Oliver Knitting Company building in Port Richmond. Her work has a similar theme to her gallery-mate's. "I'm interested in geologic forces," she says, "topographic imagery like mappings and mountains."



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How cheap real estate, creative minds and a scrappy attitude are turning Philadelphia into a happening art town

By Jessica Pressler

For 10 years, Randall Sellers, a 37-year-old, soft-spoken Tyler School of Art graduate with an ironic sense of humor, held down the sorts of jobs that have come to define the Philadelphia artist-read-slacker: In the late '90s, he managed the TLA Video at 4th and South, ringing up sales and laconically chatting with his co-workers about Fellini and Linklater. After that, he put in time lugging Ikea across town for Mambo Movers, Center City's hipster moving company. And in 2003, he was "literally scrubbing toilets, picking up dime-bags off the floor" at South Philly dive Low Bar, when the tiny, detailed, graphite-drawn cityscapes he had on display at Shelley Spector's Bainbridge Street gallery caught the eye of Richard Heller, the big-time L.A. art dealer.

Since being picked up by Heller, Sellers has quit scrubbing toilets. Now, every morning he rides his bike through the Italian Market to his studio, which isn't actually a studio at all but the window table at South Street coffee shop The Bean. There he banter with the baristas and regulars like Red the sword-swallower, and squints through reading glasses to render the tiny details on paper that will go to collectors in Los Angeles, New York or London—or appear in shows at important galleries like Tomio Koyama in Japan and G-Module in Paris. MoMA owns four of his drawings.

It's a good life. Still, this being Philadelphia, the question an acquaintance asks him on a recent, rainy afternoon seems perfectly reasonable:

"Dude, so are you leaving town or what?"

But Randall Sellers isn't leaving. Why should he? Lately, for an artist, Philadelphia is something like the place to be.

With a smattering of galleries and a handful of established artists-in-residence, Philadelphia has long had a substantial, if not exactly exalted, art scene. "We're more important than, say, Denver or Nashville, but we're not really seen as an Art Town," says Alex Baker, the contemporary art

curator at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. But that could be changing. On North American Street in South Kensington, Tyler professors Richard Hricko and Nicholas Kripal, along with developer David Gleeson, are turning the Crane Company Building, a ginormous 117,000-square-foot former plumbing and flash-freezing plant, into Crane Arts, a work/exhibition space devoted to community art. With four galleries—including the 5,000-square-foot, arctic white Ice Box gallery, the plant's former refrigeration room—Crane Arts will eventually be one of the largest and most attractive exhibition spaces in Philadelphia. It's a concrete—literally—monument to the fact that, as Nick Kripal mildly puts it, "Stuff is going on."

To anyone half paying attention, it's as plain as the Clothespin in front of City Hall or the wacky Lichtenstein that law firm Duane Morris just installed: We're becoming an Art Town.

"Philadelphia right now is like New York was in the '50s, '60s and '70s," says Claudia Gould, the director of the Institute of Contemporary Art, citing the holy trinity of factors that have brought the City of Brotherly Love's art scene to what Paula Marincola, of PEW Charitable Trusts' Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative (she receives thousands of applications yearly for artist's grants and knows such things), calls its "tipping point": top-notch art schools, plentiful warehouse space, and, of course, cheap rent.

("Well, at least cheaper," says Gould, who lives most of the time in New York. "But things are changing already.")

And it's not just Old City anymore. Artists are in Center City, South Philly, West Philly, Fairmount, Northern Liberties, Upper-frigging-Darby. They are fairly spilling out of warehouses in Fishtown, Port Richmond, Kensington and North Philly.

And their number is growing. The days of talented artists like David Lynch graduating from PAFA and automatically hastening to cities that the art world deems more culturally relevant are, if not gone, numbered. Now, artists are fleeing to Philly. "It's like the word is out," says Melissa Ho, a mixed-media artist and 2005 PEW fellow who moved here from Los Angeles eight years ago "sort of randomly," she says. "But in the past couple of years, I feel like at least once a month I meet someone who moved here specifically to be an artist."

Recent transplants include a group of art students from Cincinnati who've started the Black Floor gallery just outside Chinatown, and a group of 20-something art students who cleared out the living room of their South Philly rowhouse and renamed their apartment the Padlock Gallery.

Then there are the heavy-hitting art-world names, like MacArthur genius grant recipient and installation artist Pépon Osorio, and painter Chie Fueki. More recently, curators Carlos Basualdo and Rob Storr, the art power duo that the Philadelphia Museum of Art hired to amp up its contemporary art collection, have landed, and their presence at openings on the Parkway makes the city's art scene seem a little bit more ... official.

But by and large, the people making Philly art come alive are more like Randall Sellers—the guy who checked out your video last week. They're like the members of the Chinatown-based art collective Space 1026, who bartend and DJ when they're not making art that they show around the country and the world. Or Rob Matthews, who recently sold drawings to PAFA and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the very museum where he works as a conservation technician, "an art duster, really."

"I know," he says in his Tennessee drawl. "When the place buys your work, you should probably quit your job."

Theirs is not the horses-and-landscapes Bucks County Impressionism associated with Pennsylvania art. These artists aren't disciples of Andrew Wyeth or Thomas Eakins or Mary Cassatt. Nor are they, as Randall Sellers puts it, "dudes who splash paint on nine-by-12 canvases while listening to jazz."

The latest work coming out of Philadelphia is made with pencil, found objects, newspaper, eggs and glass, hair real and fake. It's young and innovative, and even though there doesn't seem to be a unifying factor—the days of "schools" of artists have been pretty much killed by globalization—it's maybe even a little bit distinctly Philadelphian. "There's a certain aesthetic with a lot of the younger artists here," says Claudia Gould. "A certain scrappiness."

Which also happens to be the look du jour. "The art world as a whole right now is really into the authenticity factor and this sort of urban sensibility," says Baker, "and a lot of young Philly artists fit into that."

At the opening of the Whitney Biennial in New York this year, about 10 people crammed into a tiny room in a second-floor gallery to watch Philadelphia photographer Zoe Strauss's slides of Philadelphia city streets flicker across a screen. A picture came up of a buxom woman showing off a tattoo on her chest; her nails, unfurling her snakeskin-print top, were long and curved and painted bright yellow.

"Omigod," a tastefully manicured Upper East Sider at the preview breathed to her companion. "Look at her nails."

"The quality of art coming out of here right now is so good," Strauss, a former babysitter, says, a few days after the Whitney opening. She's back in the South Philly rowhouse she uses as a studio. On the wall behind her is a mirror frosted with the image of Frank Sinatra. "It's off the chain. It's important and influential. And we're so lucky, because we don't have that whole intimidating art-star thing going on. Here, it's just like: 'Dude. I saw Randall at the Acme.'"

"I just love it here so much," she says. "I can't even stand it."

If the artists working out of Philadelphia today have something in common, it's that they tend to love Philadelphia so much. You don't find the sword-swallowing champion of the universe just anywhere, you know.

And it creeps into their work. In Sarah McEneaney's egg tempera paintings, where the red and blue zigzags of a SEPTA bus peek out of one corner. At a gallery in San Francisco this past January, where the members of Space 1026 collaborated on a group installation, the Sixers logo made its way onto one wall, as did "Street Weaves of Philadelphia," featuring found hair weaves.

"That wall in there is from 10th and Passyunk," Randall Sellers says, back at The Bean, pointing to a crumbling stone wall curving around one of his fantasy landscapes. "Kind of like right behind Acme? There used to be nothing at all in that area. It was just dirt roads and ruined buildings. People would race motorcycles down there. Right in the middle of the city!"

Does all this mean Philly is set to become Paris-by-the-Schuylkill? Will we wrest away New York's title as the epicenter of the art world? In a word: No. "Artists will always head there, or to L.A., because that's where the buyers are, and so will collectors, because that's where the credibility is," says Alex Baker, echoing the thoughts of many of the anchors of Philadelphia's art scene.

But still: Stuff is going on.

"Something special is happening here," says Shelley Spector. "Of course," she laughs, "Philadelphians are always the last to know."

As with all great art movements, it will probably take future historians to identify exactly what stuff was going on in Philadelphia, the Early Aughts. When SEPTA buses and soft pretzels and hair extensions from 12th and Market were turning up in artwork, was it a kind of renaissance? It's too early to tell. All we know is that right now, there are thousands of artists working here, right in the middle of the city.