

Editorial COMMENTARY

by Tom Starland, Editor and Publisher

My Season of Disappointment

May used to be a month I looked forward to with much excitement - in my life as an editor of a visual arts newspaper. Personally - it's a month I also get a little older. But now I tend to see it through a series of disappointments - for what could have been.

Let's start with the Spoleto Festival USA, which no longer even makes a token effort to present visual arts as part of its "World's most comprehensive arts festival".

All I can think is what would Charleston be like today if the Festival had continued to present major visual art site specific installations throughout Charleston and the Lowcountry. Yet, today outdoor art is virtually non-existent in Charleston.

The Piccolo Spoleto Festival is no better. It's been years since we have received info about their visual art offerings during this festival - by deadline. It doesn't do our readers much good to receive it later - just before the Festival starts or after in some cases. It's a good thing we hear from a few of the organizers of individual events or we would not have any info about any of the visual art offerings.

The only good thing I learned of Piccolo's efforts is that it has moved the annual juried show to the City Gallery at Waterfront Park. If it stays there it could become be a major statewide competition. But the City or the Office of Cultural Affairs would have to step up its efforts on publicity and I'm talking about advanced publicity. Not just printing up festival programs and stacking them up in rooms unseen by people visiting the city and region.

Some might say that we should go after this information. Well maybe, if we had

the staff of *The Post & Courier*, but we don't and we can't treat Charleston differently than any other area of the Carolinas. This issue is full of info from other areas - and some as close as North Charleston who presents their Festival before Spoleto and Piccolo arrive. They don't seem to have any problem getting us their information on time for coverage - every year.

I'm really disappointed in the Halsey Institutes' 30th anniversary exhibition. The choice to present Shepard Fairey with Jasper Johns instead of works by William Halsey, the man the gallery is named after, is just wrong. Fairey is not the kind of person that should be made a model for much of anything.

Check out Fairey's bio on Wikipedia. His problems with Fair Use issues comes down to - it's OK for him to use other artist's imagery to create his works, but he'll sue any other artists who tries to use his imagery. His legal issues with Fair Use and graffiti isn't usually mentioned in his press releases. Nor is the fact that he left the greater Charleston area victim to every wannabe, get famous quick artists who plaster everything in sight with stickers like Fairey's Obey sticker.

I'm wondering if the selection of Fairey is the reason Spoleto Festival USA did not claim the exhibit at the Halsey Institute to be one of their offerings this year. They didn't claim exhibits at the Gibbes Museum of Art either, but was Fairey's tarnished reputation a reason or did they finally just give up totally on the visual arts and being a comprehensive arts festival? I don't know the answer to that and no one will probably ever say.

I'm also disappointed in Charleston's commercial gallery community. We got some press releases from a few folks, but

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not as many as we should have and in many of those cases it was an individual artist who sent us the info.

I've been covering Charleston's visual art community for 27 years and I'm amazed and disgusted how complacent it has gotten - thinking that they are still on top of the visual art community of the Carolinas, when truth be told, since 2008 it's been in a steady decline while other communities in the Carolinas thrive. Some of that has to do with zero help from the city, county, and business leaders, which have allowed what was once an economic draw to become a - well "it's a nice place to visit and the people sure are polite" kind of place.

It's sad what has happened to Charleston. Back in 1987, I was working on our first issue of *Charleston Arts* during the Spoleto Festival. One of our first stories was about a group of folks who were presenting a bust of Gian Carlo Menotti, the founder of the Spoleto Festivals, to the City of Charleston. Today the City can't explain what happened to the bust. They either lost it or threw it out, but I'm not sure we'll ever know and they don't seem to care.

Hey, don't get me wrong - I still love Charleston and there is a lot of great things going on here in the visual art community, but the month of May has become my season of disappointment - for many reasons. It seems the opportunity to really be great just always slips away.

ArtFields 2.0

ArtFields should drop the word "Epic" from its tag line. This competition might be epic to Lake City, SC, but it is not epic to SC or the Carolinas. The SC State Fair's Fine Art Show presents more art than ArtFields does every year and all its entries are from SC. That show is probably seen by more people - due to it being a state fair and taking place in Columbia, SC - a major population area. They may not give out \$100,000 in awards, but does the money alone make something epic? No. And, how can you start out epic?

ArtFields is a great effort for such a small town and hopefully one day it will be epic, but it's not epic yet.

And I'm not the only member of the media that doesn't think ArtFields is epic. Media coverage has fallen off - ArtFields is no longer the shiny new kid on the block. I've seen little advance coverage of the event other than stories about local artists who got into the event.

This is a tactic the PR folks at the SC State Museum used to use to get coverage in local newspapers. Send them a list of local artists in the event and they will find somewhere to put that in the local paper, but little else is often offered about the overall event.

Most of the media coverage is taking place in the Pee Dee area of SC - which it should be as the event is taking place in their own backyard.

But how does the media in Louisiana get excited about an event when only a few artists - if any, are involved in the event? And how many folks do you think are coming from Louisiana to see the event? It's one of the basic flaws of the competition. Artists who live far from Lake City are at a disadvantage to win one of the awards based on visitor's votes - except in the case of the juried award - which I predict will always go to an artist from outside SC - just to keep those other states in play. Local artists hold the advantage by being able to show up at the event and lobby for votes.

Now the event offers advance online registration for voting. I'm not sure how this works. I hope there is some way these folks have to prove they actually came to Lake City to see the art before they vote - otherwise they can just look on the ArtFields' website and select their favorites. This could also be a way to say more people came to the event than really did. I'm hoping this is not the case. But, since the leaders of ArtFields have yet to say how many votes last year's winners received, I'm not sure how valid this issue will remain in the minds of the participants. If they are counting votes - which is para-

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Rhett Thurman



Of a Feather

Oil on Wood

6 x 8 inches



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