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Hopes are high for Bemis auction

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WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



Masuoka

Looking for one of artist Keith Jacobshagen's landscape masterpieces to hang in your living room?

How about one of Christina Narwicz's intricate abstract paintings, or perhaps a self-portrait of the grizzled, double-chinned artist Craig Roper wearing a slinky evening gown?

All of that and more is available tonight at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts' 11th annual art auction.

Few people know more about the Bemis and its popular auction than Mark Masuoka, 49, the Bemis' executive director since 2003.

He first came to the Bemis 20 years ago as one of the center's resident artists. At the time, Masuoka, a Hawaii native, was an up-and-coming young ceramist fresh out of Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. His teacher there had been world-renowned ceramist — and Bemis co-founder — Jun Kaneko.

We recently asked Masuoka about the Bemis and tonight's auction.

Q. What is the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, and how is it different from your typical art gallery or museum?

A. The Bemis Center was founded in 1981 and is one of the top five international artist-in-residence programs in America. Every year, we receive about 750 applications from around the world to fill just 24 residencies. So the artists who do get in are usually the top people in their fields. It's important to remember that these residents are not students. They're professional artists who receive studio space and a stipend from us to create whatever they want. The work they create here is then shown here.

Q. Why is the annual art auction such a big deal?

A. It's a big deal financially because it's the Bemis' biggest fundraiser of the year. The proceeds of the auction are used to support future artist residencies. It's a big deal artistically because the art is all from top local, national and international artists. If you want to know what's cutting edge in the contemporary art world, come see the artwork at the Bemis auction.

Q. How much money does the auction typically raise?

A. We grossed about \$370,000 last year. But that figure represented all the activity associated with the auction exhibit, which ran for seven weeks. It wasn't all raised at a one-night auction.

Q. Did the recession last year have an impact on the 2008 auction?

A. Last year's revenue was probably down about 10 percent, which was significant for us but not a disaster. This year I'm predicting the best auction ever. There's a lot of interest in the event. Our auction Web site has been averaging a phenomenal 2,000 hits every day.

Q. How many people attend the art auction?

A. We'll have as many as 600 people come through the door on auction night, and around 200 will go to the live auction. ... The rest of art is auctioned off in silent auction, where people write down their bids.

Q. How much art is on display?

A. We have 374 artworks that were created by 254 artists. The artwork is on display in three exhibit rooms and on the walls, covering over 10,000 square feet. The work is in every style. It's two dimensional and three dimensional, abstract and representational.

Q. What's new this year?

A. We're working with an online auction company called Proxibid. This arrangement will allow people to bid online in real time from anywhere. So now if people are out of town, they can still participate in the auction. People can access Proxibid through our Web site, www.bemiscenter.org, and www.proxibid.com/bemis.

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