

PIVOT POINT: JOHN SPARAGANA IN MOTION

John Sparagana is my favorite kind of artist (and human): generous, intelligent, ambitious. Don't believe me? Keep reading.

My first memory of Sparagana is from 2007. He treated me to lunch at the Rice University Alumni Club — even validated my parking. We commiserated about the humidity, pondered the urban sprawl, and bemoaned the drenching rain. What I remember most is the impression he gave me about Houston's art community: unlike any other yet, somehow, somewhat underexposed.

For the past 16 years, Sparagana has been commuting from Chicago to Houston for his Rice University teaching job (technically, he's been teaching for 20 years and commuting for "only" 16). He maintains a dual relationship with the cities, defining his life by the dynamic balance of diverse responsibilities: family, friendships, art.

"At times it's overwhelming but things continue to get more interesting. My commitment to and love for my family means I return to Chicago from Houston if at all possible every week, which means stepping into an airplane every few days. That variety, that shift of perspective, is something that I enjoy."

He works closely with Chicago's Corbett vs. Dempsey Gallery and has a steady exhibition history with Houston's Bryan Miller Gallery.

"Bryan has a clear vision and sensibility, a sharp mind, and integrity; Houston is fortunate to have his gallery in the mix," he says. "It's an excellent context for my work, and I'm happy to have such a clean, beautiful space to present my work in Houston."

Sparagana now has a third city-based relationship in the mix. His exhibition record is growing in Berlin, including a mid-October project in the SOX vitrine space followed later that month by "Synecdoche," a group exhibition of collage at Bourouina Gallery.

Sparagana's work is at once vague and compelling: distressed reproductions of iconic media images, fuzzy reports of catastrophic events, and the familiar yet distorted news magazine format. His process includes cutting up a magazine image, almost physically exhausting the materials, then recombining the elements to produce a ghost of the original image, as if it had passed through a

parallel universe and lived to tell about it. The resulting construction reminds viewers that there are multiple avenues by which to explore our image-driven culture.

Sparagana explains, "The driving force behind my work with media images is to shift their terms from an informational to a poetic and/or critical mode, and to engage public images as an author rather than a consumer."

His current exhibition at Bryan Miller Gallery, "Going Down for the Third Time," includes new works that appropriate formalist painting compositions from Ellsworth Kelly, Kazimir Malevich, Hélio Oiticica and others, adding to the layers of provocative, referential imagery.

In July 2011, Sparagana accepted the position of Department of Visual and Dramatic Arts (VADA) Chair at Rice, a job he deines as "fun." His vision is for a more productive and comprehensive visual arts education for students, significantly increasing the interchange amongst VADA, other Rice departments and the Houston art community, thereby contributing to the vitality of the cultural and intellectual life of Rice and Houston.

The campus arts vibe is buzzing these days according to Sparagana and he is banking on its sustainability. VADA maintains collaborations with the Museum of Fine Arts Houston CORE Fellows; the cinema program continues its incredible programming while partnering with a diverse range of Houston constituencies; the Art History department now offers a PhD program; and Rice Gallery carries on with its highly regarded art installations. Sparagana attributes much of this vitality to his department and staff, specifically Assistant Professor Christopher Sperandio for his entrepreneurial and collaborative spirit.

Additional personnel acknowledge the value of art practice and demonstrate support for VADA including Rice President David Leebron and his administration, Dean of Humanities Nick Shumway and University Art Director Molly Hubbard. Meanwhile the School of Architecture provides a great model for both studio art and art history, augmented by their roster of visiting artists and scholars.

Further indicative of Rice arts vitality is the latest VADA venture, The Emergency Room, which

Sparagana describes as, “A new exhibition space is aimed at better serving the Houston arts community and arts on the Rice University campus. Visiting emerging artists will develop new exhibitions, give public lectures and interact with Rice studio arts students. Emerging artists are an underserved population within the Houston region, and the Emergency Room is an attempt to correct this by presenting the highest quality exhibitions within the contact of a serious academic program.”

Add to all this a March 2012 Dada event with Dutch musician Jaap Blonk, co-sponsored by VADA and the English and Art History departments, plus murmurings of additional programs and a new visual and performing arts building, and I’m convinced it might actually be fun to be Chair.

So Sparagana will continue in his Superman style for the foreseeable future, flying here and there for the sake of his multiple responsibilities and passions. Thank goodness Houston is part of that composition.

— NANCY ZASTUDIL

Nancy Zastudil is an itinerant curator and freelance writer who can’t seem to stay away from Houston.

October 2011 | A+C Houston 17

September 9–October 22

“Going Down for the 1ird Time”

Bryan Miller Gallery

www.bryanmillergallery.com/present



GD #3: Cairo, Tahrir Square Protest, Morris Louis “Unfurled Series: Beta Ro” (1959-60), Hélio Oiticica, “Metesquema” (1958). Sliced and mixed archival inkjet prints, acrylic on paper. 59 x 88”. (Image courtesy the artist and Bryan Miller Gallery).