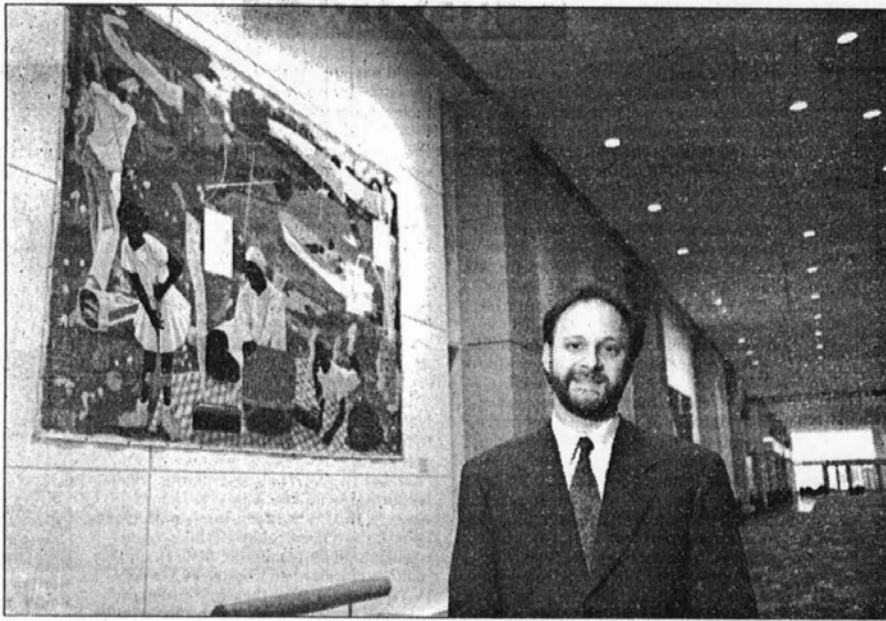


SHOWCASE

■ *McCormick Place South was designed with spots for painting and sculpture, but it's not easy to make the Western Hemisphere's largest convention center a showcase for public art. Joel Straus selected 70 artworks for the building's collection.*



ABOVE JIM FROST/SUN-TIMES

LEFT: Curator Joel Straus selected Kerry James Marshall's "Past Times," to be displayed at McCormick Place South. BELOW: Richard Hunt's "Chitown Totem" is also featured.

Art gains a place

BY KEVIN M. WILLIAMS
STAFF REPORTER

Joel Straus is either brave, ambitious, crazy, or all of the above.

A Chicago-based independent art curator, Straus was tasked with assembling an art collection for the more than 3 million square feet of McCormick Place South. Not sure of where to start, Straus just started walking.

Trolling the expanse of the \$675 million building with copies of the architectural plans, Straus decided to focus on spots that would yield the most visual impact. He also had to keep in mind the need of the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority: to create a collection representative of the entire community.

"This complex gets a cross-section of humanity from every continent, race, gender, everything," said Straus. "And we had the same guidelines that any public project has, including affirmative action, which we exceeded."

"But my goal was to make it seem like there is in fact a collection and not just stuff put in this voluminous space. I didn't want to just decorate the building, but to have a collection that has integrity in its own right. But I also wanted to maintain the integrity of the architecture."

As the largest convention center in the Western Hemisphere, McCormick Place South is an art curator's nightmare. It is almost constantly festooned with banners touting whatever trade show is in town, which serve as a visual distraction from any art that might be around. There also are people with badges, on cell phones, using the hallways that Straus so lovingly augmented as runways to their next appointment or seminar.

But having said all of that, Straus has done a marvelous job in assembling one of the largest public art collections in Illinois. Although you might be impressed by the collection's total cost of \$2.1 million, don't be. In the rarefied world of serious art, a couple of million really isn't a whole lot of money. More impressive is the depth and quality of the works that Straus has managed to assemble.

Though the collection contains 70 works, there are some centerpieces. A roster of the artists represented reads like a who's who of local and national art. The McCormick Place South collection includes works by Kerry James Marshall, glass artist Dale Chihuly, Neil Goodman, Roger Brown, Richard Hull, Richard

Hunt and William Conger.

There also are epic works from Bo Bartlett, a painter whose "Homeland" is a powerful depiction of wistful longing, and the dean of Illinois landscape artists, Harold Gregor, and his 25-foot work, "A Late May Evening."

"I wanted the art to be challenging," said Straus. "But this is not a museum. It functions as a place for people to meet, and congregate. But after we installed everything, I saw that most of these pieces have a relationship."

Architect Tom Ventulett envisioned a place for art in his structure, attempting to bring a human scale to a space, with three-foot high walls at some spots. But as with most art collections, the issue was money. The McCormick Place collection was financed entirely with construction cost savings.

While generous, this meant that Straus got a late start, since he had to wait until the project's completion to begin assembling art. But Ventulett's scheme left spots for paintings and sculpture, even while designing for the possibility of these being no art. This worked in Straus' favor.

"Passages," by Goodman, is an 80-foot relief situated on a long, curved wall broken up by columns. Straus wanted a relief for this spot, and typical of the kismet that allows projects like this one to get done, Goodman had already begun work on "Passages" hoping for the opportunity to create on an enormous scale, when Straus came calling.

"It was terrifying," said Goodman. "I swept my floor for about two days trying to come to grips with it. I also thought that if I didn't pull it off, that I was still going to have to look at it for the rest of my life."

Goodman described the assemblage of the more than 200 hand-carved, bronze pieces of "Passages" as playing chess with massive elements.

"It was one of the most intensely focused and painful times of my life."

Another powerhouse of the collection is "Past Times," by Marshall. A vivid, explosive work located in the West Concourse, very close to that of Goodman, "Times" made its art world debut at the 1997 edition of the prestigious Whitney Biennial.

Marshall's piece can almost be described as Impressionist in that, like Degas and Renoir, this is a simple yet stunning depiction of people occupying their leisure time with everyday activities.

Assembling the art was a collaborative process that included the architect and a volunteer board, which had to approve each of Straus' selections.

"That was one of the most exciting parts," said Straus. "I had to work with the artist, and then the board in trying to convey the artist's idea, then the architect, lighting designer and building engineer."

As can be expected from such a process, as well as the limitations of the budget that Straus had to work with, there are some less-than-compelling pieces contained in this collection. Yet these pieces are few and far between. What we get instead are such works as Chihuly's "McCormick Place Chandelier."

A work that dominates the hallway of McCormick South's fourth level, this glass, reddish orange composition is a blaze of organic shapes. As with all of Chihuly's work, it almost is creepy and repelling, but at the same time absolutely galvanizing. You simply have to look at it.

Straus, who was trained as an artist, thinks of this collection as a creation, a massive collage. The challenge is to assemble what is going to work together, to be as adventurous as possible while working within the project's constraints.

Not surprisingly, Straus had little trouble getting artists to take part in a project that allows their work to be seen by more than two million people a year. It's the kind of exposure that established artists come to almost expect, yet that is critical for emerging creators.

A potential downside of public art, disturbance or vandalism, also becomes part of the trust system that beauty in common spaces calls for. There is an active security force at McCormick Place South, but Straus, who is also entrusted with maintenance of the collection, must rely on simple human decency.

"People will bother things, but it hasn't been a major problem so far," said Straus. "Typically, if things are hung in a way that is respectful, people will respect them."

"Public art is almost subversive. Maybe people see it and maybe they don't, but with art being insinuated into their lives, they get their art without quite realizing it. But the fact that it exists is enough. That it's there.

