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“Welcome, my son, welcome to the machine.”

These Pink Floyd lyrics, blasting from a car stereo, would normally remind the listener of his/her place within an all-seeing, ironclad system. They point to the dilution of creativity and the triumph of human greed. An artist's death sentence.

But Dana Owens isn't your typical listener. For him, those words provided the moniker for a project that is changing the cultural landscape of Lark Street. In 2013, Owens co-founded the Machine: A Creative Co-op with Kateryne Lora and Mic DeBellis, two fellow graduates of the SUNY Albany arts program. It's a working studio that welcomes people to witness the creative process—and take part in it.

Owens doesn't use the term “machine” pejoratively. He's stripped away the stigma, whittled the concept down to its essential elements: cooperation, efficiency and productivity. “A machine is composed of many different types of working parts. In order for a machine to operate, each part has to work together: Gears, grinds, cogs, pulleys. That had an interesting feel to it because, essentially, that's what we were doing—working together to try to keep this place going. The 'Creative Co-op' came into play because I didn't want to limit what we were able to do. Any kind of creativity is welcome here.”

Despite this open invitation, walking into the Machine is a bit like barging into a stranger's living room. The place feels improvised and alive, like the seat of a revolution. It's intimidating. When you step through the door, you're met with artful clutter. Easels rest, folded, in the foyer. To the left is a sun-drenched room filled with canvases at various stages of completion—faces peer outward and landscapes exert their own subtle gravity. Against the back wall, tailoring tools rest on a shelf that's littered with patterned, urban garb. Screen printing equipment, clothing racks, a dark room and a photo enlarger dominate the remaining area.

Meghan Mason, a current member, believes that the chaos serves an abstract function. “I think the most interesting thing about this place is that we are a working studio. So people come in here and it can be a bit of a mess. But it's an exciting mess because you're seeing the progress of work being created by five different artists....It's enjoyable to share that with people because they can come in and ask questions about our techniques and what we're doing...We get to educate the public a little bit.”

The Machine seeks to restore art to its rightful place—on the street. “In a digital world where there's so much crap on the internet, seeing raw, tangible art, live in front of your face...It's exciting, refreshing, and rewarding for a lot of people.” Owens describes traditional art galleries in terms of seclusion and sterility. To him, they represent the end of a creative journey but fail to account for the whole picture. “Our artists' retreat just happens to be in a high-traffic zone. Sometimes it's hard to get into someone's creative mind and see what they're doing. But not here...Art is a journey that starts with a concept and takes many twists and turns along the way. However, the journey can be just as thrilling and can often provide insight into the creation and the creator.”

Members of the Machine: A Creative Co-op view art as an interaction rather than a static

product. They seem to feel a sense of responsibility for the cultural development of Lark Street and Albany as a whole. Owens explains, “Lark Street gets a facelift every decade or so. For a while it was mostly just bars, but now the arts scene is on an up-and-up. We’re here, along with the Barn and a few smaller art hubs popping up.”

The Machine has also formed alliances within the SUNY arts and alumni networks. Recently, the university donated a large-format printer, easels and a photo enlarger to the cause. The Machine also hosts several SUNY interns throughout the year.

Since the Machine celebrated its one-year anniversary in late June, public demand for its presence has increased. During the summer, it’s not unusual to spot a crowd of frisbee-playing art enthusiasts gathered in the driveway of the Machine, where informal expos crop up regularly. The Machine’s band, JamSauce, plays a weekly stint at *Alive @ 5* and leads open jam sessions at several nearby venues. The studio itself features live painting events, tutorials, food and comedy shows, and exhibitions by other local artists and musicians. Owens says he hopes to attract artists “who need the exposure and wouldn’t otherwise be able to show their work.” On September 5th, Prism Glassworks will host a glass blowing demo on the premises.

Owens dismisses any mention of competitive tension between members Megan McClean, Mic DeBellis, Kat Brockschmidt and Meghan Mason. “We’re a very diverse group of artists so it’s not like we’re all competing for the same thing. It just happened to fall into place like that. If you go out into the world as a customer looking to get something done, you have to go a bunch of different studios. But if you come here, you have a wide variety of mediums to choose from.” Members’ skill sets range broadly to include line drawing, painting, screen printing, tailoring, photography, graphic design and film production.

A collective mindset helps Machine members navigate the practical and aesthetic challenges of professional art careers. Meghan Mason notes, “Self confidence is a huge part of being an artist.... If you’re working on something that you don’t think is appropriate, or you’re stuck on it, and another member comes along and points something out that hadn’t occurred to you.... That criticism, whether positive or negative, gets you thinking in a different frame of mind. It’s a lot easier to gain confidence within a group than it is on your own.”

The Machine: A Creative Co-op accomplishes a task usually reserved for art objects. By design, it’s a work-in-progress. It doesn’t deliver scripted scenarios. The public is free to observe, learn, contribute and ask questions. They can decide whether to invest in the experience or simply pass through. Yet somehow the Machine frames that choice starkly, reminding individuals of their own potentiality and challenging them to begin new journeys of self-expression. After all, what is art if not a catalyst?

--Carson Frame