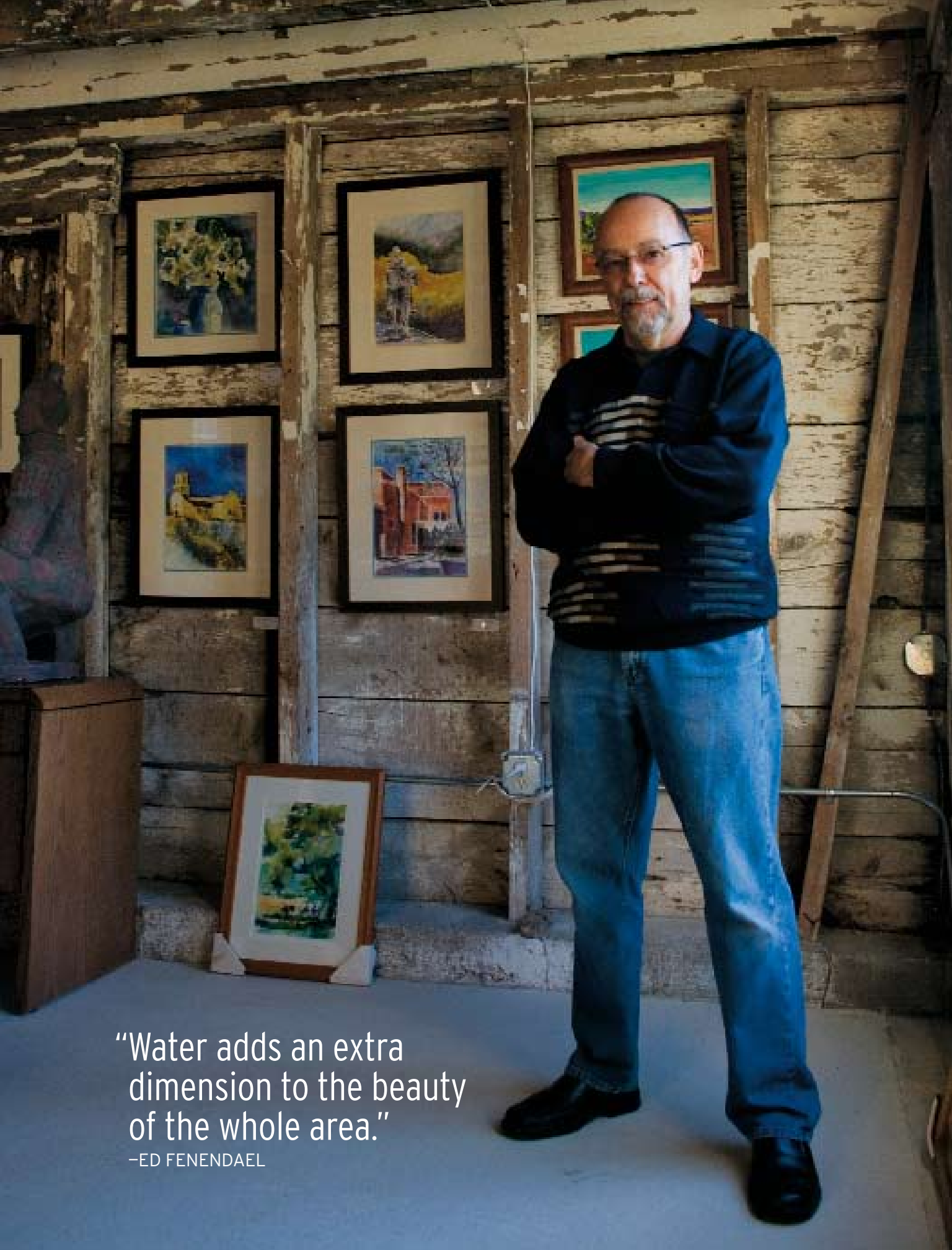


EASTERN WISCONSIN'S ARTISTS HAVE VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE THAT
LOOK TO THE AREA'S HERITAGE AND LANDSCAPE FOR INSPIRATION.

A SENSE OF PLACE

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAM POLCER



“Water adds an extra dimension to the beauty of the whole area.”

—ED FENENDAEL



Summer Sky, by
Claudette Lee

The phrase “sense of place” comes up a lot when discussing art; it’s the idea that the character of an area is reflected in the music, visual art and literature that come from it. Why did grunge music from Seattle sound so gloomy? What is it about the dramatic deserts of the Southwest that inspire so many fine artists? What if Fitzgerald lived in Florida, or Twain in Texas?

In turn, local art goes on to inform an area’s identity. It shapes the way we see the communities in which we live. And we often travel to experience, firsthand, the places that our favorite maestros were inspired by, seeing the locales through the artists’ eyes. It is this interplay between artist and place, each defining the other, that makes some destinations vortices for creativity.

There is a region of sometimes-overlooked visual artists all along the lakefront of eastern Wisconsin, from down in rapidly developing Racine, with its stellar **Racine Art Museum** (ramart.org), up to the pastoral, scenic tip of Door County. While the communities forming this swath of creativity are as varied as they come, the artists who populate them share a number of similarities—not least of which is that they’re beginning to change the way the art world sees the Midwest.

FOR MANY, the “wings” that adorn the Santiago Calatrava-designed addition to the **Milwaukee Art Museum** (mam.org) quickly became something of a beacon after its 2001 completion. With new leadership and a radical design, the museum has trumpeted the city’s arrival on the world’s art map. For Jason S. Yi, a Milwaukee-based artist and professor at the **Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design** (miad.edu), the addition is significant in terms of the rest of the world’s perception: “When I go to other places, that’s one of the first things that people want to talk about. It’s become an icon of Milwaukee, which is good. Hopefully it will help the art scene gain momentum,” he says.

Spectacular as it is, the museum isn’t the only thing to look at in the area.

For Yi, who moved to Milwaukee from Washington, D.C., in 1996, it is Lake Michigan itself that may be in large part responsible for drawing and inspiring creativity along its shore. “Being able to see the horizon provokes imagination. The expansiveness conjures wonderment,” he says. “That’s how I like to think of it. Sometimes I go out to the lake and I just sit and watch.”

But no one feels as connected to the water as those a few hours’ drive up in Door County, a picturesque peninsula that juts out into the lake and is a popular warm-weather vacation spot for people throughout the Midwest. It is also home to a slew of galleries and the popular **Peninsula School of Art** (peninsulaartschool.com).

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“Water adds an extra dimension to the beauty of the whole area,” says Ed Fenendael, who occasionally teaches at the school and whose watercolor pastoral scenes of Door County have been displayed all over the world. Next door to his Inn at Windmill Farm in Baileys Harbor, Fenendael runs a studio and gallery typical of many in the area in that it is hard to find (pick up a gallery guide at the Door County Welcome Center to really get a feel for the county’s artistic offerings) and imbued with an attractive, rustic quality. “As a result of that extra beauty [from the lake], there is an extra shot of inspiration,” he says. “It also creates incredible weather effects, as well as beautiful sunsets and sunrises.”

Ultimately, the lake is one of a few natural elements that add to the artistic allure of the region. Amy Chaloupka, a conceptual artist and curator at the **John Michael Kohler Arts Center** (jmkac.org) in Sheboygan, moved to the area from Seattle and found inspiration in seasonal contrasts. “The fields are constantly changing. You get this very visual sense of time. The corn is at a certain height and then one day it’s gone, it’s plowed out. You know it’s fall. The dirt gets blacker in the winter, and so on,” she says. “In the Northwest, it’s green all year-round. When you live in cities, there’s less of a sense of that sort of change. Living here, I feel a lot more connected to it, seeing it every day.”

Beth Lipman is a glass artist and the coordinator of Kohler’s Arts/Industry program, which allows visual artists from around the world to work in the Kohler (of fixture and faucet fame) company’s foundries and shops, ultimately displaying their work at the Arts Center. She finds that the environment around Sheboygan provides the mental space that allows her to focus on her work. “I find solace in this landscape,” she says, “but I don’t feel isolated or disconnected from the larger art community. I know that when I’m driving down a country

road, while I know where there are people, there may not be more than a couple of people for miles around me. That kind of openness gives me a mind-set that allows me to really work.”

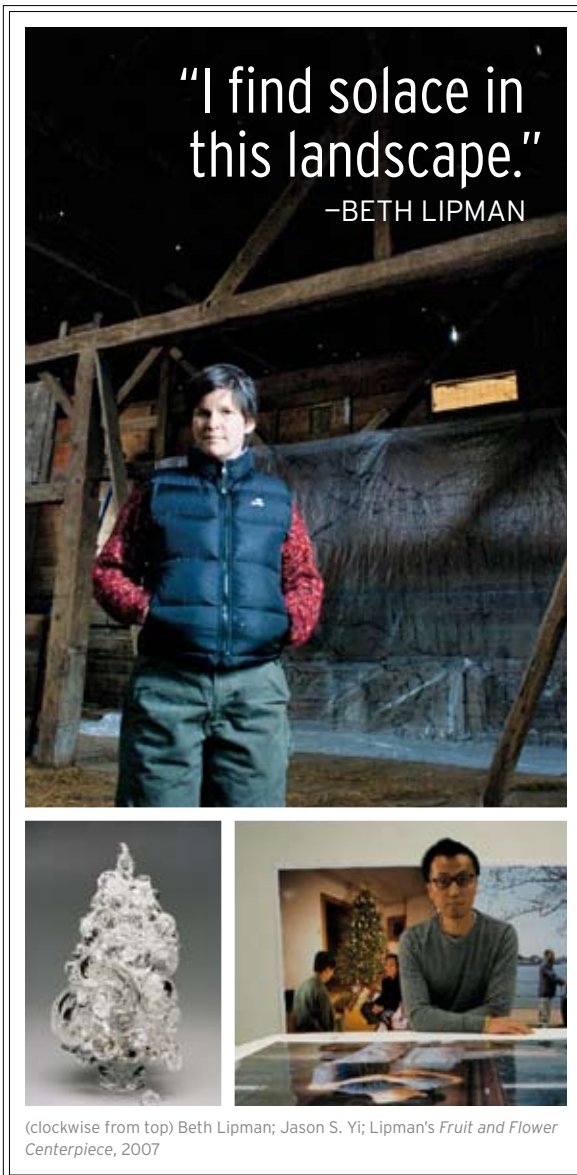
Even though she’s not originally from Wisconsin, Lipman’s work ethic is something that she has in common with many of her peers in the area; it gives the Wisconsin art community a character all its own and is perhaps its biggest asset in its hopes for the future. As James Barany, a MIAD professor originally from just south of Door County, puts it, “One of the most fundamental roots of our community is [being] invested in physical labor, in being an entrepreneur. I find it interesting that this kind of connection still exists.”

“You don’t find that in every part of the world,” Lipman says. “Here, it’s totally uninhibited. If you can make things, art isn’t separate from you. It’s created this can-do environment that is really amazing.”

Young, energetic DIY gallery owners are a perfect example of that kind of attitude, attributed to the oft-cited Midwestern work ethic. They have been, with increasing volume, making themselves heard all over Milwaukee. Recent college graduates, many of them from MIAD, aren’t finding places to show their work—they’re creating them, and transforming the city’s art scene in the process. Milwaukee’s **Historic Third Ward** (historicthirdward.org), which has been bursting at the seams with galleries exhibiting artists from around the world for years, is no longer

the only place to see art.

“It was less than a month after we got back that we were looking for studio space to make our own art,” says Jessica Steeber, who, along with her friend and recent MIAD graduate Cassandra Smith, founded the **Armoury Gallery** (thearmourygallery.com) upon returning to Milwaukee after a six-month around-the-world journey. They found a spot just north of Downtown that was too nice to use as studio space



(clockwise from top) Beth Lipman; Jason S. Yi; Lipman's *Fruit and Flower Centerpiece*, 2007

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and decided to fulfill their ambitions of opening a gallery. While only on its sixth exhibition, Armoury has built a solid name for itself and continues to attract attention. For example, Kathryn E. Martin, an artist garnering acclaim from the Wisconsin art cognoscenti, recently presented her work at the gallery (a large-scale installation of Martin's, titled *flotant*, can be seen at the Kohler Arts Center through Jan. 11). Martin is impressed by entrepreneurs like Steeber and Smith, and with the spirit of comraderie that exists among the younger set of art lovers.

"With these galleries popping up, the owners seem to always be there to help each other out, and the artists support each other—as opposed to stepping on each other to get where they need to be," she says.

Wisconsin is indeed known as a friendly state, and this attribute is demonstrated in the close-knit art communities in towns, both large and small, along the coast. The village of Cedarburg, for instance, is a quaint commuter town only 20 minutes north of Milwaukee. It is home to the **Cedarburg Artists Guild** (cedarburgartistsguild.com), a strong and supportive network of area painters, sculptors, jewelry-makers and the like. Claudette Lee, one of the guild's presidents, says that while Cedarburg is special, it embodies a spirit found in similar towns.

"In every little community in the country, there are people who are very much involved in creativity of some kind, be it cooking or metalsmithing or whatever. We just happen to have this hotbed of visual artists living in a small town environment. It's an interesting place to be," she says. "My hope is that people in general will realize that they can buy a piece of original artwork for the same price as a video game."

Perhaps one of the biggest draws for art lovers to the area is the exceptional value of the work up for grabs. At her studio and gallery in the center of the lakefront town of Port Washington (about 30 minutes north of Milwaukee), **Shirley Gruen** (shirleygruen.com) sells small, framed versions of her original work. "I get a lot of tourists in over the summer, and sometimes they don't want to spend \$20 or \$30 on a print," she says. "So I make sure there's always something to fit somebody's pocket. I want my art to go out. I want it to be affordable. In that way, I guess



(above) Claudette Lee; (below) Shirley Gruen's gallery



ART ROOMS

EASTERN WISCONSIN HAS LODGING OPTIONS TO SUIT A VARIETY OF AESTHETIC SENSIBILITIES.

Inn at Windmill Farm

Situated on a Dutch-style farmstead with a studio and gallery in the barn adjacent to the house, Ed Fenendael's B&B is an idyllic spot to call home base while you explore serene Door County.

920-868-9282; 1900windmillfarm.com

Inn on Woodlake

A newly renovated member of the Destination Kohler family, this 121-room boutique-style hotel in the Village of Kohler features, you guessed it, top-of-line fixtures and a modern design scheme to match.

800-344-2838; destinationkohler.com

Iron Horse Hotel

The revamp of a historic building located at the crossroads of the historic Fifth Ward and Latin Quarter is perfect for those who appreciate sleek design (and motorcycles).

888-543-4766; theirhorsehotel.com

Intercontinental Milwaukee

Right in the heart of downtown Milwaukee, this contemporary spot features a swanky restaurant and bar, as well as an impressive art gallery on its ground floor.

414-276-8686; intercontinentalmilwaukee.com

you could say I'm a populist painter." Towns like Cedarburg and those found further up the coast in picturesque Door County are full of galleries selling excellent original work at way-below-modest prices.

Indeed, the art is more attainable, but perhaps more important to the artists themselves are the affordability and ease of maintaining their creative lifestyles—without sacrificing many of

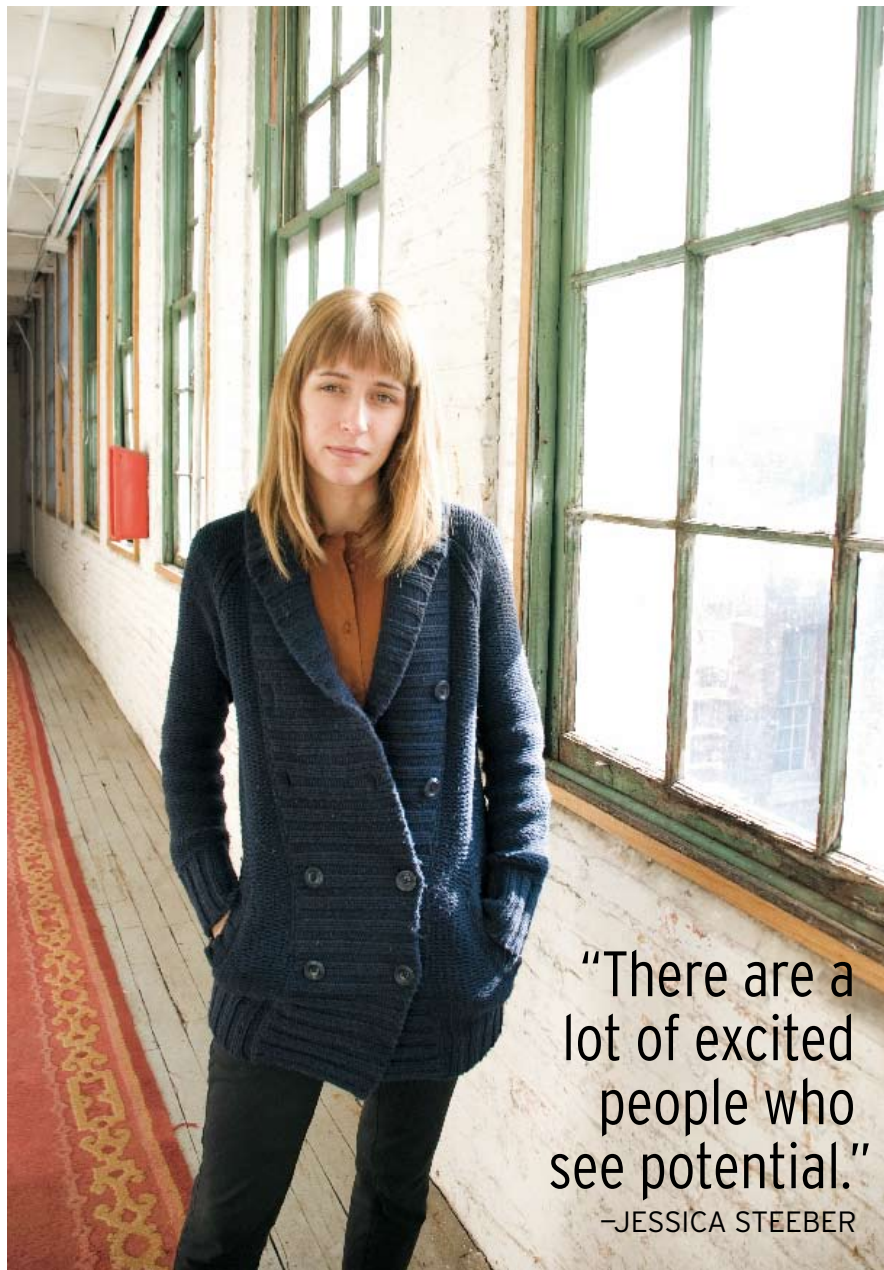
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the benefits that accompany more well-known art destinations. "There are a lot of excited people who see potential, and it's still affordable; it's still a manageable city. It allows you to do things that you probably can't do in cities like New York," says Steeber, of Milwaukee. "It's also easier to stand out here, whereas in larger cities you're up against a hundred amazing galleries. Here, you can establish a name for yourself pretty quickly."

Such discussion of regional differences may prove to be pointless in the near future, however. As technology continues to shift focus from a person's location to the quality of his or her idea, it is no surprise that artists in Wisconsin—particularly those who are enthusiastic about the advantages inherent in being able to instantly disseminate information to practically anyone, anywhere—welcome this sea change with open, paint-flecked arms. Some anticipate the transition out of a common and somewhat baffling kind of "we're not Chicago" complex which may be responsible for the sense that they have something to prove, and others out of a straightforward desire to look to the future.

"It doesn't make a difference where you are anymore, as long as you can tap the Internet and have the ability to travel. It's been a wonderful 'problem' for artists to have to deal with," says Barany, whose most recent work, *Project Identity*, began with an invitation, sent digitally to high schools across the country, asking for student collaborators. The result, a 29-minute animated video, is being shopped to film festivals around the world.

It is precisely this kind of forward-thinking, industrious spirit—inherent in a region that has, for a long time, valued hard work, progress and goodwill with equal intensity—that positions eastern Wisconsin to make significant strides in fostering and holding onto its art communities, whether



"There are a lot of excited people who see potential."
—JESSICA STEEBER

they're made up of guilds tailoring their work to appeal to weekend vacationers, recent art school graduates determined to change the gallery map of Milwaukee, or recent transplants in awe of and inspired by the landscape.

"I think we have a very solid foundation here of artists, instructors and connoisseurs, who continue to strive and push forward," says Martin, who moved to Milwaukee from the East Coast to attend MIAD in 1997, and hasn't looked back. "Money doesn't come easy for the arts, but with the right attitude, we're doing it. And I think we'll continue to do it." ■

MIDWEST AIRLINES offers daily flights to and from Milwaukee. Details can be found at midwestairlines.com.