

Not just tagging along

Arts scene benefits from IU's drawing power — as new faculty, students arrive, so do their creative partners

By Jimmy Jenkins

March 6, 2011, last update: 3/5 @ 12:08 pm

Special to the H-T



click photos to advance (4 photos)

Ellen MacKay got a job as a professor in IU's English department, which also brought her husband, Randy White, to town. White decided to create local theater group Cardinal Stage Company. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

BLOOMINGTON — Lora Fosberg spent 25 years living and working as an artist in Chicago. In 2009, she came to Bloomington.

What prompted the move?

It's a story familiar to many in this town: She followed her mate. Indiana University brings thousands of people to Bloomington each year, and many of those professors, students and so on bring their significant others along.

The challenge for those folks — dubbed the "Trailing Spouses Club" by one member of the group — is to find their own niche, and to develop their own lives while they are here.

"At first I thought it was going to be really bad, but then last year I created some of the best art I've ever made," Fosberg said about her recent transition in life.

For 15 years, she had lived and worked in a downtown Chicago loft, a space she was forced to leave due to gentrification. She and her partner Sara Minard retreated to a family cottage in

Michigan City but continued to commute to Chicago — Fosberg for her career in art, and Minard for various forays in the food industry.

It was during this period at their cabin in the woods that Fosberg's subject matter turned from brooding urban landscapes to more serene scenes of nature, and Minard read an advertisement in Gourmet magazine that would change both their lives.

"I had worked for a chocolatier for years, I was a private chef for a family, and I spent a lot of time in high-end fine dining while we were in Chicago, so the interest in food was always there, Minard said. "I just wasn't quite sure how to apply it. Then I saw an ad in Gourmet for a food studies program at IU."

After researching the university and approving of the local food scene, Fosberg and Minard decided to make the move to Bloomington. Now Minard is enrolled in a Ph.D. program in IU's Anthropology Department, with a focus on food studies. Fosberg has resumed painting in her new studio: the basement of Minard's house, just outside of town.

During a recent interview Fosberg beamed with pride and energy as she described the creation that had taken place. An established painter, Fosberg has her master's from the Art Institute of Chicago and has shown her work all over the country and in Europe. Her style has a familiar, commercial look to it that draws the viewer into a comforting, pleasing place. But that comfort is usually interrupted by the discovery of an underlying conflict that Fosberg uses to challenge and provoke.

Once predominantly set in a more raw, urban environment, Fosberg's paintings have changed since moving to Bloomington. She takes her dog Eddie for walks at Griffy Lake and has become more attuned to the trees.

"To visit the woods around here is like walking into the kingdom of God," Fosberg explains.

"This humongous exposure to nature has really affected me after being so urban for 25 years. I used to go to the city for inspiration, but now I find myself spending time in a different kind of cathedral — so for my most recent work I wanted to reflect those nature-driven thoughts."

Those thoughts are evident in her most recent body of work. There are large, hand-printed reliefs taken from a linoleum cut and mounted on canvas that bring the viewer into a multicolored forest. She uses house paint on hand-made paper, and adds detail with India ink.

Images are then cut out and layered upon one another to add increasing depth.

"I love paper and using it in new and interesting ways," Fosberg said. "I like the use of collage."

She has also developed a technique of using gouache on plaster, coating a drawing with wax, then buffing it to a shine.

Physical layers intertwine with layers of thought and message, banana paper textures contrast gloss and reflection. And sometimes there is text.

"When using language in paintings and drawings, there is a risk of creating a one-liner," Fosberg warns.

Instead, she deftly incorporates words into her works, juxtaposing image and language to narrate a story.

"I'm interested in creation and destruction, man versus nature, nature versus man, who will win?"

"The notion of progress is also something that intrigues me. To think about how man infringes upon nature."

Fosberg chose Restaurant Tallent as the first Bloomington venue to exhibit her work because of the friendship she and Minard established with the owners over a shared interest in philosophy and food.

"There's quite a radical food movement in this town that I think works well with my interest in man's relationship to nature," Fosberg noted.

She thinks it will be a great introduction of her art to Bloomington, and is hoping to start a conversation with like minded artists, as well as make some new acquaintances.

Although, she noted that her plan could backfire: "I get so much work done here because I don't really have any friends."

B-town a great place to edit

Adam Langer is a man who appreciates and thrives in the solitary aspect of his art: writing.

Born and raised in Chicago, he spent a decade writing, setting up theater companies, freelancing, producing theater and independent films. He edited arts, culture and literary magazines until 2000, when he won a fellowship to work on fiction at Columbia, and seems now to have found his true calling.

"I enjoy writing for the theater and writing scripts, but I prefer writing fiction, because you have a great deal more control. The only limits are your imagination. When you write scripts you sometimes end up editing yourself based on what's financially feasible, not what's best for the story."

Langer also enjoys the in-depth development of character, and has employed it to great success.

After his wife, Beate Sissenich, earned her Ph.D. in Political Science from Cornell, she took a job in the political science department at IU, and they moved here in 2003. Since then Langer has published five successful novels while living in Bloomington, which he finds is a better town to edit than to write. The books, including "Thieves of Manhattan" and "Crossing California," a bestseller on many "Best Books of 2004" lists, draw on Langer's experiences in Chicago and New York.

"You'll find hints of autobiography in my work," Langer said. "One of the things I think people don't understand is that all of your life goes into writing. Every experience you have, every person you meet, everything you see — you may be writing fiction, but the ideas came from somewhere."

Part of the reason Langer believes he has not written about Indiana is because he has not had time to reflect on his time here. He also said he gets much more inspiration from the bustling community of artists found in large urban areas.

"I'm the kind of person that left Chicago because it was getting too small for me."

Langer has flown under the radar in Bloomington. He spends

his time editing around town at places such as Feast and the Uptown or in Bryan Park and on his front porch, while also raising two daughters, ages 1 and 5.

“It’s been a great community to raise our children, and we like the fact that the kids’ grandma is only a few hours drive away in Chicago.”

He is busy preparing manuscripts for future projects, working on freelance writing assignments for the likes of the Wall Street Journal, and speaking about his experiences to a neighborhood book club here in town.

The ‘Trailing Spouses Club’

Randy White is yet another self-described member of the “Trailing Spouses Club” — a term he coined.

“It’s interesting to me how it seems artists tend to follow academics. I certainly feel like that’s been the case for me,” said the artistic director of Bloomington’s Cardinal Stage Company.

His wife, Ellen MacKay, a Shakespeare professor in the IU English department, got a job in Bloomington in 2003, a critical point in White’s own career.

“I had been in the theater my whole life, and things were really starting to peak for me.” He began as a child actor in his home country, Canada. White went on to major in theater in college, moved into directing and started a theater company. He got his master’s at the University of Alberta, then moved to New York where he worked with a production of “The Lion King,” directed some off-Broadway shows, then traveled all over the country directing and acting.

At the time, his wife had a job offer in Bloomington, White had a chance to direct a big show in New Jersey that could have altered his career, but he had already committed himself to a burgeoning success story of the Bloomington art scene: the Cardinal Stage Company.

“It’s hard to watch some people try and find their place and never quite make it,” White said. While he knew the prospect of building a new theater company was a grueling endeavor, he felt he had found his niche.

“There’s a long history of theater in Bloomington,” White acknowledged, “so I knew that it was possible.” He decided to attempt one show, “Our Town,” in 2006. “It was remarkably successful, so I decided to stay here and do more. We put together a board, got a non-profit status. With help from lots of people from the community, this project has really thrived.”

White sees more good things to come: “We’re trying to find stories that mean something to Bloomington – we are looking at launching some new play work that tells Bloomington stories that I think people will be very excited about.”