

Des Moines metamorphoses

I belly up to the bar of a local hotel restaurant. This guy sitting next to me sizes me up and says, "You look too old for the music thing. So, you here for the bike show or the car show?" I explained that I was simply a local guy having dinner. My inquisitor looked disbelieving but quickly bonded with a band of biker brothers who had descended on Des Moines over the Fourth of July weekend, pretty much selling out every hotel room in town and packing bars and restaurants. This is not your parents' Des Moines. It isn't even your teenaged brother's Des Moines.

"I remember, because it wasn't very long ago at all when everyone left Des Moines on the Fourth of July, when there wasn't much of anything to do here," recalled architect Kirk Blunck.

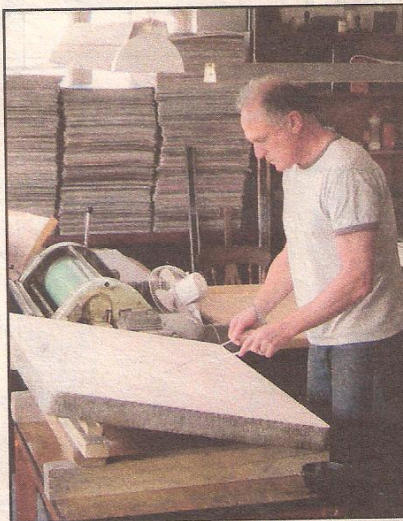
Blunck takes pride in the changes. His renovations of historic East Village buildings have done more than anything else to attract visitors to formerly repulsive parts of downtown. Watching people file into Lucca, Kitchen Collage, Miyabi 9 and a dozen other bustling businesses in his buildings, Blunck declared a milestone.

"Having Steve Vail here is just a huge thing. It's a major, major deal to have an international gallery," he explained.

Steven Vail Fine Arts (SVFA) opened in February on the second floor of the Teahout Building. An exhibition of Jan Frank paintings followed by a show of prints by the artists in the Pappajohn Sculpture Garden placed SVFA many levels above other downtown exhibit spaces, at least by measurements such as the insurance value of inventories and artists' renown with Google.

Vail's next exhibit is by Not Vital (a real name), who is as avant garde as an artist can be. The 62-year-old Swiss aristocrat lives much of each year in a mud and barbed wire hut in Niger next to a pile of waste from local butchers. There he cultivates his sense of smell, works with silversmiths on sculptures that sometimes look like instruments of torture, and casts cow dung. Vail has actually sold some of the latter for him. For his show at opening July 29 in Des Moines, Vital will exhibit more conventional art — a portfolio of lithographs.

Originally representing only Iowa artists, Moberg Gallery has readjusted its scope. It's currently hosting an impressive exhibit of 16 "Visiting Artists." Missourian Nick Naughton's large, wood-cut prints document the toil of migrant workers in dramatic fine detail. Colorado painter John Hull peeks into the world of carnies and trailer park police calls. Sculptor Thomas Stancliffe's freaky environmental



Not Vital at work in his less primitive studio.

reflections presage the Gulf oil disaster.

Things are also changing on a personal level for local artists. Many received big career breaks this summer. The National Academy Museum selected Phillip Chen's print "Lucky 8" for its Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary American Art. Painters Ignatius Widiapradja and Larassa Kabel were both signed by 101 Exhibit, an esteemed contemporary gallery in Miami, Fla. Their works are part of a show that runs through midsummer there. Kabel's works also will travel to a 101 Exhibit in East Hampton, N.Y., in August.

Painter Jeremiah Elbel won the second round of the Saatchi Showdown. His paintings are now displayed with those of 11 other showdown winners at the new Saatchi Gallery in London. Last year, more than 400,000 visitors saw the Showdown finalists' works, a record for a contemporary art exhibition in England.

Painter Alex Brown signed for a one person January show at Twig Gallery in Brussels, Belgium and also for a Frances Young Tang Museum show this September in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. Brown's legendary New York City gallery Feature Inc also rebounded after a chaotic year of untimely expansion and retraction.

Sculptor Mitchell Squire won a residency at Maine's Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, perhaps the most notable program of its kind. Alex Katz, Ellsworth Kelly, William King and Janet Fish are among its alumni. Squire is one of 65 participants selected this year from 2,045 nominees worldwide. He also won a residency at Ox-Bow in Michigan. Joan Mitchell, Keith Achepohl, Claes Oldenburg, Ed Paschke and Miyoko Ito are Ox Bow alums. CV