

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2009

BILL TEEPLE AND ICON GALLERY: GROWING AN ART SCENE...IN IOWA



ICON Gallery, Fairfield, Iowa.

The city of Fairfield, Iowa is an art powerhouse in the Midwest. Among its population of approximately 9,600 is an unusually large percentage of artists, and at one time there were 19 art galleries in operation. There are key people at work—and working hard—to make the Fairfield art scene happen. While I want to eventually mention all of those involved, I'm starting with Bill Teeple and ICON Gallery. A California native, Bill first visited Fairfield in 1975 and permanently relocated there in 1998. As an art teacher with a teaching studio, Bill's involvement with the Fairfield art scene gradually blossomed into ICON Gallery, aka Iowa Contemporary Art.

Because of the work of Bill and the many volunteers that comprise its membership, ICON Gallery is actively doing its share to keep the arts thriving in Fairfield. With a nominal yearly membership fee, ICON members can attend such things as lectures, films, dialogues, and presentations at the Gallery, along with the opportunity to go on special group outings and trips to museums in the Midwest. Bill, Allen Cobb and Donna Colby, also co-host a weekly ICON radio show on Fairfield's local station KRUU, discussing art issues and interviewing artists.

Through Bill's keen insight and careful direction, ICON Gallery has been recognized

Through Bill's keen insight and careful direction, ICON Gallery has been recognized as an important site for artists to have their work shown. His reputation as a teacher is also noteworthy as he's helped many of his students realize their own artistic visions and to discover just who they are as artists. Many of Bill's students cite how much he has encouraged them and helped them grow and mature artistically. Talking with Bill Teeple about art is an experience itself and the interview that follows gives a hint of that experience.



Bill Teeple, artist, teacher, visionary, and the guiding force of ICON Gallery.

Painter's Bread: How did you start in the arts? How/when did you realize you were an artist?

Bill Teeple: I took being an artist for granted. I could draw well from childhood. I can still remember, as though it was yesterday, setting up my first still life to paint when I was eight. Drawing and painting was just another thing I did. I didn't identify with being an artist until I started winning awards in High School. I decided to major in art and started at Cal State Long Beach, but transferred to Berkeley when it seemed like everything was happening in the Bay Area. I got art fundamentals in Long Beach and I got exposed to the edge of reality in Berkeley. A well-rounded education.

PB: You graduated from Berkeley with a degree in art; who influenced you the most there?

BT: Jim Melchert comes first to mind. He was a great teacher—really interested in his students. I was influenced by everyone around me. Peter Voulkos, Harold Paris, Ron Nagle, Robert Hudson—especially visiting artists like David Hockney and R. B. Kitaj. At Cal State Long Beach, Conner Everts had a huge impact on me. He really worked outside the box. I'd never seen anything like that before in a teacher.



Sign for the annual Large Works Show at ICON.

PB: When and how was ICON Gallery conceived?

BT: Because Fairfield is an art colony of sorts, the populous already has a demand for the arts within its culture. I had a teaching studio and decided to move it to 51 East Broadway. There happened to be two more empty offices complete with track lighting, so I decided to hang the work of some of the great Fairfield artists in those spaces. One thing led to another and before long, we started doing openings, advertising, post cards, and a membership program. Eventually, ICON was officially formed as a 501c3 non-profit organization and then moved to its present location on the west side of the square in downtown Fairfield.

PB: Is it possible that the concept of ICON Gallery can be implemented in other cities around the country?

BT: Yes, and the concept of satellite locations has interested me. I would like to extend the vision of ICON to Des Moines, given the right opportunity there.



Upper gallery at ICON.

PB: What do you see as the future for the Fairfield art scene and is there more to be done?

BT: Fairfield can be a player in 21st century art if the serious artists here step up to the plate and take the pitch. We have to not be afraid to ask the big questions and attempt to solve them in our work. We are at a huge turning point in culture. It's totally up to each artist how deep he/she wants to go.

PB: What theories or beliefs do you have regarding creativity or the creative process?

BT: Art is an experience and the artwork is a commentary on that experience. The success of the artistic process is the depth of the experience and the truthfulness in the commentary. People should be focused on the depth of their experience—the crucial element in art *is* the experience. Otherwise, you don't have anything to say. But then you have to drive that experience into material form. At every step of the

forming process you have to be true to the experience. I also use what's now considered a dirty word in the art community—beauty. By beauty I mean wholeness and just-rightness, and in a work of art there can't be wholeness without just-rightness and vice versa. We must ask ourselves if the expressions of creative people are conveying the qualities of wholeness and just-rightness. Beauty transcends, and when art transcends its parts, it delivers a flash of what life is.



View from upper gallery looking down to the lower level.

PB: How do you approach the teaching of art?

BT: I didn't decide to be a teacher. The opportunity came to me. However, everything I had done up to that point had prepared me for the task. It was just a matter of stepping onto the stage. I'm very intuitive in my approach to teaching. I don't know how I feel about a student's work until I hear myself talking about it. I feel like a funnel. All my years of experience and practice get channeled into the words that come out of my mouth. When I teach like that something magic happens between me, the student, and the work.

PB: What advice do you have for those who may want a career in art?

BT: Don't quit your day job. It's better to be making art that's true than making a living selling your art. However, always know you are first and foremost an artist and the day job is just what you do to continue to paint. If you are making art that is true, it will find its way.



View of stairs leading to the upper gallery. The teaching studio can be seen through the doorway below.

PB: Books that you would recommend?

BT: I could recommend a lot of books, but I feel it's most important to connect with your sense of inner knowing. Books and teachers should be approached to validate or challenge what you feel to be true—all to strengthen your inner truth. Never do anything because you think that's what others would have you do. Get clear on what you know and what you don't know and then move forward based on what you know.

PB: What contemporary artists or developments in art interest you?

BT: I'm interested in every development in art. Art is a record of the development of the self. Art today is looking for meaning and is desperately asking the question of what art is, and the viewer is participating in that questioning. Each person is being asked to find the answer to that question within their self.





More information about Iowa Contemporary Art Gallery can be found at:

<http://www.icon-art.org/>.
