BRETTELL

An Experience

BRETTELL: An Artist’s Homage to the Dynamic Influence of Rick Bretell
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An Artists’ Homage
to the Dynamic Influence of Rick Brettell

Curated by Greg Metz
September 10, 2021–October 9, 2021
SP/N Gallery at UT Dallas
Richardson, Texas
BRETTELL: An Artists’ Homage to the Dynamic Influence of Rick Brettell, exhibition curated by Greg Metz, at SP/N Gallery, The University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, Texas, September 10, 2021-October 9, 2021

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Curator Greg Metz
Editor Benjamin Lima
Editor and Designer Katrina Saunders
Designer Maedeh Asgharpour
Production Assistant Jouette Travis

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INTRODUCTION

his catalogue and exhibition, by some measure, is an autobiography by Rick Brettell translated through the eyes, minds, and experiences of just a few of the many he illuminated and were privileged to have known, worked with, or benefited from his generosity. In many cases all three. It was first to merely be a collection of some of the artworks he had acquired over time, yet I soon realized that in no way did this reflect the depth and breadth of his influence and eclectic preferences. It became much more, as was Rick. His true sense of collecting might be best expressed by Melissa Berry, his longtime friend and former public programming director at the DMA: "Rick did not just collect art representing an artist’s vision/thoughts/experiences at a particular moment in time, he collected artists and experiences with artists so that he would see through their eyes, their unique insights to the world around them. And he wanted others to experience what he learned from these encounters with them, not just from the objects they create, thus culminating with his final vision for the design of an 'Athenæum'-not an object, but a shared experience.” It is my hope that this small glimpse of those shared experiences are evidenced here in this catalogue and exhibition. Please enjoy as Rick would want and did.

Foreword

Greg Metz
Curator

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Rick was eclectic in his tastes, and in the works of art that he assembled into a collection that fills the walls and surfaces in our home. Much of his collecting had to do with personal relationships—with artists he came to know as colleagues or friends. And many of the items in the collection have powerful stories to accompany them. The first work of art we acquired was given as a wedding gift by the mother of one of his best friends in high school. During the Christmas break in 1972-73, we were in Denver and Rick spotted a work of art in an office supply store in downtown Denver—an Alma-Tadema hand-colored lithograph titled “A Reading from Homer.” That afternoon we dropped by his friend’s mother’s house to say hello and Rick could not contain his excitement about the $75 Alma-Tadema that he thought should hang in her apartment on the empty wall behind her sofa. Unbeknownst to us, she quietly went out to purchase it, and presented it to us right after we were married in June of 1973 and had returned to Denver so that Rick could finish working on his first book, Historic Denver—a book that became his Yale Master’s essay. We have kept the Alma-Tadema with us ever since. The second work that came into “the collection” was a Philip Pearlstein print—Pearlstein was teaching at Yale one semester and so of course Rick met him and then splurged (he was a graduate student at the time) to acquire a work by him—a nude on a colorful blanket.

Rick spent four years on the faculty at UT Austin, and during those years made friends with many of the studio art faculty. Our Bill Wyman came into the collection as a housewarming gift. We had told everyone to bring a plant to the party celebrating the purchase of our first home, and Bill brought a painting of an avocado plant that still hangs in a place of honor above Rick’s
During those years we also added several works by Kenneth Hale to the collection. Ken was always experimenting with new methods of printmaking, and Rick was fascinated by his changing interests and changing styles. Another piece is an abstract work by Paula Townsend, the spouse of Rick’s Pre-Columbian Art colleague, Dick Townsend. It uses watercolor and graphite and reproduces some Pre-Columbian iconography.

Once he took the job as Curator of Paintings at the Art Institute (in 1980), Rick was exposed in myriad ways to the world of galleries and dealers, particularly in London and Paris. He was mostly “shopping” for the Art Institute, but on the side, he started to assemble some French prints and drawings that we could afford. These are gems that only a trained “eye” could have spotted. In those years he also became close to Ivan Albright. Ivan and Josephine were on the list of participants for a trip that Rick was leading to English country houses. (This was Rick’s first stint leading a trip; over the years, he became very good at it, and it allowed him to travel the world.) On the list it simply said “Mr. and Mrs. Albright.” When Rick arrived in London and met the group of travelers for the first time, Mr. Albright came up to introduce himself. He used his first name and out of Rick’s mouth without thinking came “Ivan Albright—I thought you were dead!” Ivan laughed uproariously, and they became friends until Ivan actually did pass away. Ivan dedicated one work of art, a lithograph titled “Appears the Man,” to Rick, whom he described with the phrase “there is nothing he does not know.” Right before he died, Ivan invited Rick to his home in Woodstock, Vermont, where he had lived since 1965. Ivan begged Rick to save some of his etchings which he said that his wife did not like and would probably burn. After moving to Dallas in 1980, Rick continued to collect Texas artists, among them Jim Magee and Peter Nickel. Some were works by students in the UTD graduate program—Chad Airhart, for example. Rick also collected works of art made by artists who came to Dallas as part of the residency program at UTD—among them two works by Peter Barrickman. One of the Barrickmans Rick considered to be a kind of portrait of himself—one sees stacks of books in an office space and feet propped up on a chair, implying the hidden presence of its subject. Works by Jean Lacy and Greg Metz also found their way into the collection. Jean and Greg had both worked with Rick on a fundraiser for the Dallas Opera, creating works of art inspired by particular operas, and we purchased the Metz at the auction of those works. Jean created a work of art titled “Night Migrations” that resonated with me because of my work on gender and migration. And recently Jean has created a posthumous “memory box” for Rick—a place where I can place personal items that meant so much to him, including his red and blue framed glasses.

Rick was always browsing sales catalogues, mostly so that he could make suggestions to collectors he knew about works that might be wonderful additions to their respective collections. But occasionally he saw something that he wanted for us. In one such catalogue he saw a work of art by my great uncle, Ernest Biéler, in a Swiss auction catalogue. It was a portrait of a seated bourgeois woman. He corralled our close
Greg Metz, El Greco meets Rigoletto in the Beltway, 1995
Graphite on BFK, 39” x 49”
Courtesy of the Richard and Caroline Brettell Collection

Ernest Biéler, Portrait of a Seated Woman on Sofa, 1908
Tempura on shaped canvas, 46” x 58.5” sight
Courtesy of the Richard and Caroline Brettell Collection

Colin McCahon, Titirangi, 1957
Oil on canvas, 25” x 20.5”
Courtesy of the Richard and Caroline Brettell Collection

friend Joachim Pissarro, who at the time was working in Switzerland, to bid on it, and we purchased it. Rick had misread the size of the work of art and when it arrived in a very large wooden crate, he was stunned. But it hangs proudly in our dining room and Rick always said that he thought that the woman looked like the “ur” museum director’s wife.

Our collection was enhanced with pictures from my family—Canadian art (including several works by my father’s brother André Biéler, who delivered the family toast at our wedding) and a drawing by Ernest Biéler. Rick had become familiar with the Canadian pictures through our visits to my parents’ home in Montreal. One afternoon when we were visiting my parents, while they were taking a nap, Rick—ever the curator who loved to hang exhibitions—took it upon himself to rearrange many of the pictures hanging on the walls there. It was a pretty bold move, but my parents loved the rearrangement, and it stayed that way until the house was sold after my mother’s death. And then Rick joyfully welcomed many of these pictures as we installed them on the walls of our home.

To these works of art on paper or canvas, Rick added all kinds of sculptural and decorative arts. Starting with an antique Portuguese plate that we bought when I was doing my fieldwork in the north of Portugal, we have assembled a collection of plate ceramics from places where we travelled. They are of little monetary value, but they carry high emotional value, triggering powerful memories of places we have been and loved. In Paris, Rick acquired two Meunier bronzes. At a Spanish market, we purchased a religious figure with a tin frame to go on the same wall with a work of art made by my Uncle Andre Biéler during his years in Mexico—an image of the church in San Miguel Allende framed in Mexican tin and mirror glass. Rick also used to prowl the old Antiques Mall near Love Field, looking for objects that he liked, and he filled our house until there were few open surfaces left. And then there are the photographs—another interest of Rick’s that developed during graduate school, when he presented a paper at the Frick Symposium on the high horizon line in 19th century photography. A few of these are already in the collection of the Dallas Museum of Art, but some remain with me.

Among the final things that came into our collection were a Colin McCahon painting that Rick encouraged Margaret McDermott to purchase when they were together on a trip to New Zealand, and that she left to him at her death; a portrait of Rick by the painter Luca del Baldo that now sits in our library—the room where Rick spent a good deal of time during the final weeks of his life; and a Ron Rozencohn which Ron sent to Rick, and which he moved around the house in those final weeks because he wanted to study it closely and figure it out (see the essay by del Baldo and Rozencohn in this catalogue.)

One time, Rick and the art dealer and collector Cindy Schwartz were involved in a panel discussion on “designs for living,” and they assigned each other the task of counting how many objects were in their respective living rooms. I believe that while Cindy counted nine in her spare modernist living room; Rick counted over 200 objects. This was Rick—he found beauty in so many things, wanted to have them around him, and arranged them artfully so that they spoke to each other. He was forever the curator and the collector.
Inviting the Arts Community Into the Arts Institutions

Greg Metz

In early 1980, I returned to Dallas with a fresh MFA from Indiana University, having made frequent trips to Chicago and New York throughout those years, only to find a vibrant but struggling art scene and a museum, the DMA, that was practically a mortuary: rather devoid of local artist voices or apparent interest in them, and certainly in need of some life blood. I and so many artists were part of the struggle to change that situation, which then brought me to my earliest encounter with Rick Brettell, the newly minted director of the DMA, in 1988.

Tracy Hicks, a fellow artist, and I had co-founded an artist advocacy organization called Dallas Artist Research and Exhibition (DARE), combined with an effort to also initiate an experimental alternative art and performance space. One of our initial actions of advocacy was to organize a boycott of the DMA’s 1990 Beaux Arts Ball, an annual fundraising auction which depended on local artists donating their work for the Museum to then pawn off. When a good number of artists refused to give their works to this ubiquitous funding drive, Rick (as we were invited to call him) decided to invite us into a meeting with the ladies who ran this now-jeopardized event, to discuss our differences. We came prepared with a list of demands which included: participating artists being invited to the ball; percentages going back to the artist; using the money raised to specifically collect Texas artists’ works; and in addition, the creation of a diverse, six-member artist advisory committee to the museum director. Much to our surprise, Rick took up our cause and brokered a deal with these very reluctant ladies, to achieve much of what we were asking for. Thus began Rick’s open-armed association with the local artist community, which had previously long been ignored.

From that point on, Rick bucked the elitist museum tradition by wanting to know how the museum could better serve the artist community, meeting with us about programming needs and involvement. This took several forms, which in some cases were quite risk-tolerant for such a young director of a major cosmopolitan museum. With his support, we organized a major symposium on advocacy needs and on establishing a critical alternative space for Dallas, which over 200 Dallas artists attended. At that time the culture wars were flaring, with calls to defund the NEA and its supporting institutions. Rick approved our request to organize and hold a protest rally at the DMA against this movement, which was being led by southern Republicans: North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms and Denton County Representative Dick Armey. Funds were appropriated for banners and to bring in speakers, including City Council member Craig Holcomb, infamously outspoken pundit Molly Ivins, Texas Commission on the Arts (TCA) representative Rita Starpattern. Even Dallas Mayor Annette Strauss was invited and spoke, with ‘MC’ Rick delivering his own rousing speech of support for the NEA. As news outlets reported, there were over 500 sign-carrying artists and arts supporters that day in the museum courtyard, in a very conservative city and museum that previously had little to no history of protest. Rick was fearlessly supportive. I think many were in total disbelief that this could ever have happened in Dallas.

Rick understood that as with nature, social structures are organized from the bottom up, and he courted the art community knowing that if he could engage the city’s artists then the museum would be effectively carrying out its ‘contemporary charge’, thus assuring that their programming was responsive and relevant. In doing so, he created a Public Programming arm to the DMA and

Courtesty of the Dallas Museum of Art Archives, photo by Tom Jenkins

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brought up Melissa Berry from the education department to direct it. In one instance, she recalls his continued hosting the Dallas Video Festival, then in its third year, recounting:

“At UTD, He changed the dynamics of the Visual and Performing Arts relationship to the larger School of Arts and Humanities, relative to Art History, bringing in sought-after art writers and critics, such as the notorious Dave Hickey, renowned Princeton based art writer Yve-Alain Bois, and young Mass MOCA curator and renowned author on art and politics, Nato Thompson, just to name a few. He also curated exhibitions such as ‘Five Dallas Modernists’ featuring architecture as an art form in 2002, and invited another group of architects to imagine the exhibition space, performance venue that became a non-profit mainstay for Dallas’ thriving new art scene with 20+ years of arts programming that included a performance theater, black box video room, two spacious galleries, café and gift/book shop in the heart of a supportive UTD campus.

After leaving the museum, Rick joined the faculty at University of Texas at Dallas, where I was teaching and running the university gallery. I remember, to my humbled disbelief, him asking me to write a recommendation for him for the position he was to assume. He had plenty of other luminaries to do this, but he wanted a testimonial to his connection to the arts community. Since that time, he has written many recommendations for me and innumerable others, making us all wonder where he found time when listing all his accomplishments… on top of teaching. At UTD, Rick always volunteered to teach the large survey introductory art history course—with 150 mandatory students attending—where plato professors wanted to back out. He found, as did I, that effect.

With Brettell, they were incentivized and engaged in the ‘Athenaeum’ vision as an essential component of collective resources. Perhaps one of the most comforting things about Rick Brettell was his approachability, positivity, and his connectivity to the possible. It could be said that things with Rick Brettell were incentivized and engaged in with Rick Brettell. The narratives to follow are just a few of the many more testimonials to that effect.
For to love friendship, it is not enough to know how to bear the other in mourning; one must love the future.

Memories come in fragments.

Friendship comes in many phases. And in many ways. But always with a bit of luck. Some level of chance. A throw of the dice.

I met Rick in the Art building at UT Austin in passing. I had a certain ambition and a desire to present my work outside of the classrooms where I was studying. (I never “took” a class with Rick.) He stopped while I was putting up my work in a hallway and asked a hundred questions. These were questions that I had not had, but answers I was waiting to reveal. I am not sure if these questions have been answered.

Film of Rick Brettell playing piano, Scriabin, Preludes composed in Paris in 1896, Curated by Stephen Lapthisophon, Performed by Rick Brettell, Filmed by Michael Mazurek. Courtesy of Stephen Lapthisophon.

Austin Chicago Dallas 1976 2020
Stephen Lapthisophon
Luck provides itself as an avenue to our future. My future was steered by meeting Rick Brettell. After seeing much of my work in 1976 he recommended reading Walker Percy. I read The Moviegoer and knew that I had a friend. Well, at least I hoped so. Over the years Rick was generous with suggestions and recommendations. There is something about the exchange between artist and observer that resembles friendship but at the same time betrays it. We would like to eliminate suspicion, doubt and anxiety. What am I making? What do you see? What can we know? Together.

Rick’s generosity with suggestions of writers, artists and architects changed my thinking. I kept thinking. About those suggestions. Always thankful.

I moved to Chicago in 1977. I went to graduate school at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. My studio was not on campus. Rick moved to Chicago shortly after that as curator of European Painting and Sculpture at the Art Institute. Rick visited my studio often and willingly offered thoughts about my work. I felt very lucky for his observations.

Rick’s vast knowledge of art history and culture made him an amazing resource. Now, in my own teaching, I try to follow his practice of offering observations rather than suggestions. Or, by not suggesting “what” or “how” to do something, and instead pointing out what existed in the piece he was observing. His “suggestions” were more about literature, music, and architecture—always making my world bigger. And, by implication, pointing to the fact that an artist’s work is not limited to the boundaries of commerce or market but necessarily, the world. With one exception, he knew my work longer than anyone I know.

Memories arrive in fragments. Sometimes clean and clear breaks; sometimes they are jagged. Sometimes the edges fit together neatly and sometimes not. Sometimes sharp. Piercing and pointed.

Writing pierces the page. We wait for the wounds to heal.

I was lucky to have arrived in the same city as Rick in the 1980s. We both worked at the Art Institute for a number of years. He was making significant contributions to the art culture of Chicago, I was working in the slide library. But with his customary generosity, he often invited me to his office to get my opinion of objects he was thinking about. He was generous in his willingness to engage my opinion about potential acquisitions or exhibition ideas.

Rick presented many great works and made a huge impact on the museum. One example of his ability to challenge convention was his memorable exhibition of frames: The Art of the Edge: European Frames 1300-1900, which appeared in the fall of 1986.

Because memories return in fragments, they are eternally incomplete, floating on the edge, fractured and hard to contain. We grasp at their edges and hope to frame them in neat packages—paintings, sculpture, photographs and books—but fail to hold them securely. Best to just keep an eye on the future.

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The only book that is worth writing is the one we don’t have the courage or strength to write. The book that hurts us (we who are writing), that makes us tremble, redded, bleed.

Up to the end of his life, Rick saw many of my exhibitions I had, both in Chicago and later in Dallas—sometimes we saw the show together, sometimes he arrived early before anyone else and gave me a report later. He was kind and helpful, occasionally writing letters of recommendation, exhibition catalogue essays, or art reviews. More good luck.

My life as a teacher, and as an artist, is fully informed by Rick as a teacher. Teachers call up memories. Build on and synthesize previous moments. Memories. Fact and theater.

Where upheavals occur, where the historical fabric is ruptured, the naive mind sees only catastrophe, gaps, and discontinuity.

I moved to Dallas in 2007. I would never have moved to Texas (where I grew up) without Rick’s influence. He invited me to UTD in 2002. I was able to create an installation on campus, and came back to teach a couple years later, when I also was able to live at the UTD residency at Southside. After many years of living in Chicago, I reached out to him and asked about exhibition opportunities. Through my first chance to show in Dallas, I met much of the world I now know.

Although I now teach college students, many years ago I taught kindergarten. When I was teaching kindergarteners, my teaching partner remarked that I had a firm, recognizable “NO.” I am certain that I did not learn this trait from Rick, but I do know that we shared it. When Rick said no, he meant it. But for the most part, what I remember is the affirmative response.

Organizing an exhibition on the idea of the “act of the hand.” I asked Rick to be recorded playing the piano. I had many memories of him playing piano, and many memories of sharing ideas about music. I wanted to record the jagged action of his hands attacking the keyboard. When I asked him if this was possible his immediate response was “Yes,” with no hesitation. It was a significant contribution to the exhibition.

Now when teaching, I ask students to find and observe, and to comment on significant works of art for themselves. Sometimes there are questions about “significance.” All I know is that Rick made a significant imprint on my life, my thinking, my art, my teaching, my understanding of loyalty, my appreciation of generosity, my feelings for others, my reasons for regret, my conception of the idea of thinking and my grasp of friendship.

This is how time breaks our living. I write this now, in Dallas, the third week of July—a year after Rick died. The year itself carries its own difficulties, sorrows. We find our joys in the past but also in hope. In the time to come. The friends we have, the friends we have lost. The mourning of the future.
My Trip with Rick

Gary Cunningham

The first time Rick called was sometime in 1988. He had recently been installed as the Director of the DMA, and he wanted to repeat a practice he had undertaken while at the Art Institute of Chicago—find the young architectural talent, and engage them to curate a show at the museum. We met at his office at the museum. Small talk was brief—he made a comment on my weight and height (“My God, you are big!”). The meeting was quick and to the point. I don’t even think we sat down. We talked through the exhibition’s name and premise. Now, Then, Again would showcase the museum’s strong collection of Post-World War II art. After quickly setting on a fee, he asked me what I needed from him to do the project. I told him that I wanted to involve architect Sharon Odum, and that’s what we needed an office space in the museum, and someone to guide us to find the young ambitious city manager named Ron Whitehead.

Rick Brettell and Gary Cunningham, 2016, Puebla, Mexico

He was a delegator and did not micro-manage. He turned up at critical times to move the project forward, encouraging us to not be timid, and finding us the financial resources we needed to mount the show. During the construction of the show, we wanted to bring in our own people to fabricate and execute certain interventions with the existing walls. We ended up wandering the museum late one night, taking the Stendig “Joe” leather couch from the gift shop, and mounting it to end of a wall that crashed through another wall. It was a sophomoric move, but it kinda worked and we kept it. He was not afraid of controversy, and he saw the value of such a move to reinforce one of his goals—to attract the 18 to 30-plus year old age group and get notoriety.

A year or two after Now, Then, Again, I asked Rick to take part in an interview for a project we dearly wanted to get—the Addison Theatre and Conference Center. Our office decided to turn the traditional one hour-plus interview with the building committee on its head, by involving three participants from our past projects to go into the room, one after the other, before we even met the committee. First was a client, followed by a contractor, and last was Rick, who showed a short slide show of our work. He barely knew our work and when I met with him to go over it with him, he cut me off after a few minutes and said, “I’ve got it.” I don’t know what he said in that room, but as he walked out of the room after his fifteen minutes, I saw that many of the faces of the committee had a look about them that I would later recognize as the faces of people who had just heard a lecture from Rick, or perhaps met him for the first time. We got the job and I believe Rick’s fifteen minutes clench ed it for us.

The head of the committee was a young and ambitious city manager named Ron Whitehead. I later learned that Ron had a vision to bring the arts to Addison, and Rick had made the argument that our office was the one to pull it off. Over the years, I was lucky to hear him lecture many times, and sometimes I would accompany him to a lecture venue via jet or road trip. The road trips were telling of his appetite for exploration. I would budget an extra two or three hours for our drive to Houston or Austin, so as we would make many stops, whether to see bridges and institutional buildings in Waco, or to find all the David Williams houses in Corsicana. I learned to sit in the back of the lecture halls, so I could observe the behavior of the crowd. Every lecture started the same way—with the audience sitting back in their seats and Rick standing calmly behind the podium. As the lecture progressed, the audience members would begin moving toward...
the front of their seats, while Rick would increasingly lean toward the podium and audience. By the end of the lecture, Rick’s body would be climbing over top of the podium, with his gestures more and more exaggerated. The audience would be on the literal edge of their seats. Rick and the audience had worked themselves into a mutual frenzy.

An intense period of time with Rick occurred around the turn of the millennium; this included the Sacred Space exhibition, the Young Architects exhibition at UT Dallas, the Sixth Floor Museum expansion, and the Warhol and Jackie exhibition. Sacred Space was my great awakening to Mexico. Although I was born in Texas, I had yet to visit our neighboring country to the south. My initiation was amazing—a three-week road trip with the great photographer Carolyn Brown and PhD candidate Elizabeth Bort, who masterfully organized and managed the intense trip. We drove down in Carolyn’s aged Subaru—all the way down to the southern edge of Chiapas, machine guns and all. It was life-changing, and I came away with a respect and love of Mexico that has only grown through the years. With the scholarly research and documentation complete, we began to conceive the exhibit. It was to be a multi-venue show, and we had to devise an approach that could not only break down and travel, but also deal with the delicate and hands-off surfaces of the Great.
Hall of State, the first venue that Rick had secured. He believed The Hall of State was one of the most sacred buildings in Texas. Ideas like the use of scaffolding to formulate space and flow in the Hall of State evolved during our multiple trips to Mexico. Since we could not touch the walls or ceilings, we had to find a way build structures in the space as high as thirty feet, to support the massive photographs. Our first visit to the great Cathedral in Mexico City laid out the solution. Rick was determined to use the exact same galvanized scaffolding used inside the Cathedral for the structures in our show. He used his friendships and connections in Mexico to facilitate the transaction. Watching him navigate such efforts was akin to performance. Like the attendees of his lectures, the participants in the Sacred Space endeavor became mesmerized by Rick’s energy and vision. He knew when it was time to work the deal, and he did it effortlessly. He believed in the project. Sacred Space was the first of many projects spawned from our mutual love of Mexico, and today Mexico remains my favorite place on the planet. Rick loved the passion and energy of Mexico, and often used bits of Mexico to inform projects up here. The Athenaeum was born out of a small mental hospital-turned-museum in Puebla. Rick saw the Athenaeum as a garden occupied by buildings, not a building with gardens.

In the UTD exhibit on young Dallas architects, Rick asked the participating architects to present a single project that they felt exhibited their philosophy and process. However, he had different plans for me. Instead of a project of my choosing, he assigned my office to design a building that engaged our office compound on Dragon Street. It was to be an arts club and art storage facility for Dallas art collectors. Creating an arts club for Dallas was a reoccurring urge of Rick’s. He loved the Chicago model, and wanted a place for visiting artists, scholars, and lecturers to stay. He imagined it being open to artists and contributors of all social and economic positions. The art storage part of the program was to pay for the arts club overhead. Rick also introduced an outsider into our office team: he wanted us to work with artist Ludwig Schwarz. Our office had not collaborated with an artist before, and there was a bit of that anxiousness that often accompanied a Brettell endeavor. Of course, we had a ball with Ludwig, and this project marked the beginning of a lifelong friendship with Ludwig and Marge Schwarz. This sort of mash-up occurred many times over the years with Rick, perhaps culminating with my insertion into the world of James Magee and The Hill outside of El Paso. It is almost impossible to see and understand all the linkages in my life that were orchestrated by Rick, but it is fair to say that Rick was responsible for many of the most important relationships in my life. It is impossible to isolate Rick’s influence in my life, as his hand is everywhere.

He once sent me to Giverny, France, with one week’s notice, with absolutely no guidance or direction. I was to go and study five houses owned by the Terra Foundation. It was a few weeks before Christmas, and Giverny was experiencing the coldest winter in decades. All I could figure to do was to measure and survey the houses and grounds. I would go out for twenty or thirty minutes at a time with a laser measuring tool, and take several measurements before retreating back to the house I was staying in, to warm up and plan my next set of measurements. After four or five...
days I had completed the effort. I left France and came back home. On the flight back I began to grasp what my job was. Rick was hoping to consolidate all of the Impressionists’ archives, and make their home in the Terra compound. That was my job, and my week of archives, and make their home in the Terra Institute. I believe one of the primary drivers behind these two projects came from Rick’s PhD Seminars, and the relationship he had with his students. His students became more than students; they became collaborators on the origins and purpose of these two projects. Rick was enlisting this amazing and diverse group as collaborators and future leaders of the arts. MoTA was the last project we worked on, and like the Athenaeum, it was an all-encompassing effort, this time to elevate and promote the arts in Texas. This was his third or fourth effort on MoTA, and with the opportunity to occupy the original Dallas Museum of Art, it became his most focused and resolved. The beautiful 1936 building was tailor-made for MoTA. Rick assembled a board, and we made an ambitious project that utilized many program elements engineered to draw in students and visitors alike. Museums, EODIAH, collections, a library, studios, learning laboratories, and dining, were all to be placed in a series of splendid gardens. He wanted to place it right in the center of campus. It was very ambitious, and eventually the university decided to simplify the parameters and place it on another site on campus.

Rick’s heart: the Athenaeum and MoTA

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Rick then knew that the project was no longer viable, given the loss of a tax-free giving environment. It remains to this day the best clueless as I with respect to the effort we were undertaking, but he had faith in us. The latter years of our collaborations were consumed with two projects very dear to Rick’s heart: the Athenaeum and MoTA. (Museum of Texas Art). The Athenaeum was an ambitious project that utilized many program elements engineered to draw in students and visitors alike. Museums, EODIAH, collections, a library, studios, learning laboratories, and dining, were all to be placed in a series of splendid gardens. He wanted to place it right in the center of campus. It was very ambitious, and eventually the university decided to simplify the parameters and place it on another site on campus.

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A Change in Energy
Annegreth Nill

One could feel the energy change at the Department of Art and Art History of the University of Texas at Austin in 1976 when the young, dynamic assistant professor and academic program director Richard R. Brettell, soon universally known simply as Rick, arrived from Yale University. I had just been accepted into UT’s graduate program in 1975 after finishing two years of undergraduate art history coursework at the university.

By 1977 Rick had discovered that the University was housing a prominent Venezuelan collection of Cubist and Cubist-related art and decided to hold a cataloguing seminar with the material. Every student received three slides, picked for them by Rick, which we had to turn into catalogue entries. Amongst my three slides was a 1921 collage by the German Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, variously entitled *Grünfleck* or *für* and which was perfectly suited for the task at hand: to discover the works uniqueness and its particular meaning.

I don’t know how much Rick knew about me at the time, other than that I was born in Germany, but Kurt Schwitters turned out to be the perfect artist for me to cut my teeth on, as a budding art historian. Schwitters was probably to me what I assume Pissarro was for Rick, a kind of touchstone for the study of art and artists.

After finishing my “catalogue entry” with a lot of guidance from my new mentor, he suggested to find another collage to analyze, and to present the two works as my master’s thesis. One might say that Rick’s confidence in me was confirmed by the publication of the two works in two separate articles in the January 1981 issue of *Arts Magazine*.

Upon the completion of my master’s thesis, Rick suggested that I should continue my research on Schwitters and turn it into a PhD dissertation, and advised me to apply for a Fulbright to Germany. I never would have thought about any of those things, but the Fulbright to West Berlin, which lasted two and half years, with the help of an extension and a grant from UT, was truly life-changing.

While I was off to West Berlin on my Fulbright scholarship, Rick was off to do great things as the Searle Curator of European Painting at the Art Institute of Chicago from 1980 to 1988. My travel in the early eighties in search of Schwitters collages was a result of his mentorship, and it took me to many of the great museums in Europe. I was exposed to the best contemporary art in museums, galleries and special exhibitions like the legendary 1982 documenta exhibition in Kassel, Germany. The 1982 documenta exhibit left such an impression on me I have...
not missed a documents since—all because of Rick Brettell.

Having soaked up so much of the latest art, and having asked for my two major professors at UT, Linda Henderson and of course Rick, I landed my first job as assistant curator of contemporary art at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh in the summer of 1985. (As an aside, it would be interesting to know how many students and scholars Rick helped in his lifetime with his advice and letters of recommendations—he certainly helped me!) My job immediately dropped me into the final preparations for the fall opening of the 1985 Carnegie International, the only international art exhibition in the US at the time, and the second-oldest international exhibition by one year (after the Venice Biennale, founded in 1985).

Knowing that while in Pittsburgh I was diligently working on my dissertation and could probably use some on-site help, Rick sent me an angel in the form of Fannia Metz at the UTD gallery in 2018, was recently invited to make just a small contribution to Rick's memorial. I cannot thank Rick enough for setting my life's course and for being such an inspiring and creative leader. The above are just a few legacies to the story of Dallas's art history. Rick's dream of opening a Museum of Texas Art.

I wanted to lure the visitors to the museum with something more familiar, and at the same time show them something perhaps a little less familiar. At the time I was interested in the work of Rainer Ganahl, an Austrian born artist, living and working in New York, whose art dealt with the concept and internal structures of the computer. Although not quite understanding his work, I found its minimal aesthetic appropriate to the space and the content appropriate for what I perceived to be a tech city. While that was on my mind, I somehow landed in the nearby studio of John Hernandez and immediately had an ‘aha’ moment—I decided to simultaneously present John’s colorful, pulsating with life, but message-laden super graphics, reliefs and sculptures derived from comics and advertising with Rainer’s visualization of the black and while organizational systems and commands of the computer that were about to dominate our lives. Obviously, Rick knew what I was up to and that I was struggling to find a name for my intended project, because upon returning from a trip, he told me excitedly that he had a name for me and that we should call the new series “Encounters.” The first installment opened on February 23, 1992, and Rick purchased from the installation, John Hernandez’s stunning large relief titled H-C Avenger.

We had done 6 Encounters by the time I left, and while Rick had left sometime before that, we can consider it one of Rick’s numerous legacies to the story of Dallas’s art history. Tracy Hicks’s work, Freedman’s Field of 1990-94 from Encounters 5, which was recreated for Tracy’s memorial exhibition curated by Greg Metz at the UTD gallery in 2018, was recently purchased and exhibited by the DMA. That would also not have happened without Rick. Tracy Hicks’s studio was very close to the museum, and I was a frequent guest at his loft. We drank coffee and talked while sitting around the table that gradually became Freedman’s Field. Tracy knew I loved it and his Storeroom, and asked if I would be in the next Encounters with Damien Hirst, who had just attracted some attention in New York with his 1992-93 Pharmacy installation. Enter Dallas collector-dealer Marcia May who took me to see the show and introduced me to the Cohen Gallery in New York. A deal was struck, and Damien became part of Encounters 5. The Encounters exhibitions could be seen as one-person shows, or as a true encounter of two artists. Each artist’s exhibition had its own signage and brochure with its own author. Some were written by me, some by locally resident critics Charles Dee Mitchell and Tom Moody, and some by national writers like Jerry Saltz and Dave Hickey. Melissa Berry, the Museum’s Public Programming Director who was the Museum’s dedicated person point for DARE, handled the openings during which each artist talked about their work.

Although relatively short-lived, the series was always exciting, and I hope it achieved its intended purpose of bringing artists from various habitats together to be stimulated by and stimulating for each other and the larger museum public.

I cannot thank Rick enough for setting my life’s course and for being such an inspiring and creative leader. The above are just a few moments of his genius. Much of the abiding spirit be always with us and may Texas fulfill Rick’s dream of opening a Museum of Texas Art. My deepest thanks for so generously sharing Rick with us, and to Greg Metz for inviting me to make just a small contribution to Rick’s memorial.
The arrival of Richard Robson “Rick” Brettell at the Dallas Museum of Art was a breath of fresh air. Because Rick was curatorially minded, the internal structure of the Museum had to change. Rick viewed traditional museums as outdated and ineffective in reaching the public. According to Rick, museums must evolve to “engage the imagination” of a technologically sophisticated public. He immediately engaged the staff in a process to expand and integrate exhibitions and education programs into Dallas’ diverse arts and culture ecosystem. His goal was to broaden the Museum’s constituency, cultivate art collectors, and reach out to local artists by including them in museum exhibitions and programs. Rick organized exhibitions and programs beyond the traditional museum canon(s). His energy and enthusiasm was infectious. He was an inspiration for the entire museum staff.

I worked with the Education Department and the Go van Gogh program, a museum introduction program taken into the local schools’ classrooms to engage students with the arts and art activities with the students. The students were always excited that the museum director would take time to visit their classrooms. The program was a success, and was extended beyond the classroom to include local recreation centers, assisted living homes for senior citizens, and community festivals such as Juneteenth, Cinco de Mayo and the Asian Pacific festival, among other untapped audiences.

Rick was hardworking, competent and a caring person. He spent his last days committed to creating a blueprint for the Museum of Texas Art (MoTA), a central repository for works of art made in Texas by Texan, American, and foreign-born artists who produced significant works of art in Texas. MoTA will also recognize the work of Texas-born and trained artists who left the state. Art and art history were Rick’s passion. They were his vehicles to bring all people together.

The student in the center of the photo is wrapped in an African textile and a variety beads from the Museum’s collection of African artifacts. Look closely at the beads. There is a registrar’s archive tag attached. Rick insisted in sharing “real” objects with the students. The Birth of The MAC

Victoria Corcoran

Jeff Koons started it. I attended a lecture at the DMA with my two best art friends, John Pomara and Tom Moody. Koons talked about his banal, elevating what we think of as banal into the realm of fine art. This really piqued me off at age 25 or so, and started a conversation that took us all on quite a journey.

Tom had an idea that current art was neither strictly avant-garde nor kitsch, but was rather both at the same time. Clement Greenberg’s seminal 1959 essay “Avant Garde and Kitsch” had just celebrated its 50th anniversary, and so we wondered what Greenberg would say to this development among contemporary artists. I remember John Pomara saying something like, “Why don’t we just ask him?” As it. Except that John actually knew Clement Greenberg.

In further discussions with Chris Burns and Kenneth Tumer of the prescient Turner & Burns Gallery (RIP), an idea was born: What if we could bring in major art names wrestling with these issues to discuss the issues and thinking in light of Greenberg’s ideas? We would produce a year-long lecture series exploring this single concept deeply, from numerous angles. Howard Rachofsky listened to my pitch, and agreed to underwrite the series. Thus, the Dallas Artists Research and Exhibition (DARE) Second Saturday lecture series was born, and in partnership with the DMA, we brought in Andres Serrano, Ross Bleckner, Suzi Gablik, Peter Halley, and Thomas McEvilley, among others; and of course, the highlight was the massive overflow audience for the man himself, Clement Greenberg. We were getting notices in the international art press. What was little Dallas, Texas up to? Rick Brettell was watching it all. He knew then, better than perhaps anyone, that things in Dallas were about to get interesting.

You have to remember that back in the day, Dallas wasn’t the mecca for contemporary art that it is now; still, there were threads that lots of different people were starting to tie together. Rick was at the center of these threads, weaving dozens of ideas together, egging on the most audacious, and pushing them into being.

This was the context for DARE’s historic partnership with Susan and Claude Albritton, midwifed by Rick’s energy, vision and imprimatur, and by Greg Metz, ever the advocate for working artists. The ideas were loose, but the energy was potent. For a dollar a year in rent, DARE had the programmatic run of the place.

So when a call came from Greg—Would I be interested in taking the helm at this newly forming art center? I of course said… No. I just wasn’t interested in showing only Dallas artists.

And then, driving to Austin with my family, I started thinking: between the collectors I knew and the gallerists I met, the artist community in Dallas and their remarkable international connections, were we interested in taking the helm at this newly forming art center? Of course said… No. I just wasn’t interested in showing only Dallas artists.

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we could bring the same collaborative energy to a gallery that made the “Avant Garde and Kitsch” lecture series spring to life? What if, while showing Dallas artists, we could also put them in the larger art-world context, pairing them with artists from New York, L.A., and London? I called Greg from Austin to say: Yeah, actually, I am interested.

A meeting with Rick and Claude was arranged, and the ideas only got bigger. What if the art shown weren’t only visual art, as had been the way that this programming approach for the MAC could bring all the art-world threads together, making the “Avant Garde and Kitsch” screening room. We’d only show work made in the last five years. We’d call it the McKinney Avenue Contemporary, leaving off the words “art world.” We’d give equal energy to performing arts, music, literature, film and video? They’d already decided that the space would have a black box theater, with a sprung floor for dance, and a small screen for dance, and a small screening room. We’d only show work made in the last five years. We’d call it the McKinney Avenue Contemporary, leaving off the words “art world.”

By 1994, an opening exhibition was already underway, with more than 700 artists working in teams of three to create Exquisite Corpses—the Dada game whereby paper folded in thirds is blindly shared, one artist creating a “head,” another the “torso” and a third the “legs.” The 250+ resulting works, given as membership gifts to anyone joining at a certain level, not only raised money for the MAC, but hung in the galleries as an exuberant testament to a new way. It was art by artists for artists. The grand opening in October kicked off with an outdoor concert featuring Mary Cuzutelus, Ronnie Dawson and Junior Brown, welcoming hundreds of artists, collectors, and art lovers. This was an opening like no other, lasting well into the night, as stage lights cast shadows of Ronnie Dawson’s rockabilly guitar, mammoth against the MAC’s eerie blue walls.

Dallas native Ludwig Schwartz had the first solo show in the big gallery, paired with New York’s striking George Condo. From there, a series of exhibitions—both solo shows and group exhibitions—sought to show the work of area artists and bring in artists from around the world to connect with locally-based artists. (We were, after all, Dallas Artists RESEARCH and EXHIBITION, and promote the exhibitions and ensure that a show at the MAC really meant something. The quality of our homemade artists was revealed to be every bit as rigorous as any work out there.

We hosted guest-curated exhibitions: Charles Long’s Critical Mass: photography journal blind Spot’s editors sent all of us working. Texas Abstract, curated by Frances Colpitt, traveled from the also-brand-new ArtPace in San Antonio (as if we were a museum on a traveling exhibition schedule!). The six-curatorial installation called Gang Warfare traveled to London to be shown at Max Wigram’s Independent Art Space. Our artists were going places!

In the theater, the “True Songs of the Texas Highway” series featured intimate performances from musicians from Kirstin Hersch (Throwing Muses) to Hammill on Trial and Lithium Christmas. Kitchen Dog Theater mounted physically demanding theater that stopped me in my tracks: aerial dance, experimental theater readings, and one-person shows. We even got the once-a-year-only permission from MoMA to screen the banned Robert Frank / Rolling Stones documentary “Cocksucker Blues.”

The Dallas art scene forever. He brought collectors and artists and institutions and writers together, made all of us feel we could do something extraordinary if we worked together.

Goddam it he wasn’t right.
Remembering Rick Brettell

Bonnie Pitman

Standing outside the door of Rick Brettell’s home was always in itself a joyful experience. I anticipated the fantastic conversations, fabulous food, and the new people I would meet. Through the door, I often heard Rick playing on his piano the music of Scriabin, Mozart, and Schubert, his favorites. When Rick played, he was working through problems and new ideas in his immensely creative mind. The minute I rang the doorbell, the music stopped. The door opened and he smiled broadly, welcoming me into his home filled with art, books, and memories from a lifetime of creative work and travels that he shared with his beloved wife, Carol Brettell. Rick’s active mind was already onto our lunch and conversation about art, people, and how to change things. I would beg Rick to continue playing on the piano, but he would not hear of it. He always reminded me, “It’s time for us to do...”

Rick and I shared a deep passion for art, teaching, people, artists, our community, and of course getting into trouble. We both loved to play and were not afraid to take risks. “NO” was not a word that was in either of our vocabularies. We also shared, with a 16-year interval in between, the honored title of the Eugene McDermott Director of the Dallas Museum of Art, and worked tirelessly to support and promote the museum during our tenures. We were both close to Margaret McDermott, and we helped form an Artists Advisory Committee at the DMA. On December 1, 1989, for the first ever “A Day Without Art,” the DMA hosted interventions by local artists in response to the AIDS crisis and to honor its victims. Rick oversaw the establishment in 1990 of a Texas Art Purchase Plan to acquire works by local artists including David Bates, James Suris, John Hernandez, David McManaway, Trenton Doyle Hancock, and many others. The Otis and Velma Davis Dozier Travel Grant was established in 1990 to benefit Texas artists. In 1992 he launched Encounters, a series of contemporary art exhibitions that paired Texas artists with international artists. The series’s focus was to work with living artists of diverse backgrounds, and to serve as an index on developments in the contemporary art field.

Rick’s efforts to promote local artists continued. In 2000, he launched Encounters, a series of contemporary art exhibitions that paired Texas artists with international artists. The series’s focus was to work with living artists of diverse backgrounds, and to serve as an index on developments in the contemporary art field.

Rick became the first museum director hired after the museum’s relocation to the downtown Dallas arts district in 1984, having served as the Searle curator of European Paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago and a professor of art history at UT Austin. He worked to turn the DMA into “a truly public art museum,” overseeing its substantial building extension of more exhibition space, and an expanded library located in the 140,000-square-foot addition of the Nancy and Jake Hamon building.

During his tenure, multiple important exhibitions were presented including Georgia O’Keeffe 1887-1986 (1986), the third most-attended exhibition in the DMA’s history; Images of Mexico: The Impressionist Contribution of Mexico to 20th Century Art (1988); and Black Art, Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African American Art (1989). The first exhibition devoted to Camille Pissarro’s cityscapes, The Impressionist and the City: Pissarro’s Series was co-curated by Brettell and the artist’s great-grandson Joachim Pissarro and opened at the DMA in 1992.

Rick was an incredible and visionary leader for the Dallas Museum of Art and a beloved and deeply influential figure in the arts community in Texas and beyond. His contributions have permeated so many aspects of the arts landscape in Dallas over the past three decades in ways that will continue to have a permanent and profound impact. Generations of citizens will benefit from his leadership in building Dallas into the great center for the arts that it is today,” said Dr. Agustín Arteaga, the DMA’s Eugene McDermott Director.

The Dallas Museum of Art (DMA), 1988-1992

Essays

The Impressionist and the City: Pissarro’s Series was co-curated by Brettell and the artist’s great-grandson Joachim Pissarro and opened at the DMA in 1992.

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The Dallas Museum of Art (DMA), 1988-1992

Essays
The University of Texas at Dallas: A time of innovation for the arts (1998-2020)

In 1998 Rick was appointed Professor of Aesthetic Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD). During his tenure he was recognized as a masterful teacher of graduate and undergraduate students, and initiated countless programs in the arts that would enhance the role of UTD locally, nationally, and internationally. He was the spark that engaged UTD to create a broader vision for the arts and artists into the life of a campus largely focused on the sciences. In 2005, Rick was named the Margaret McDermott Distinguished Chair of Arts and Aesthetics at UTD, thanks to a generous gift from Mrs. Nancy Hamon. Rick was unstoppable, endlessly on a quest for the new, seeking to bring great art, artists, and ideas to the university community and North Texas region.

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Our time together at UTD

Rick spearheaded the opportunity for me to come to the University of Texas at Dallas in 2012, when I was invited by Hobson Wildenhal, provost and Dennis Kratz, dean of the School of Arts and Humanities, to be a distinguished scholar in residence. For several years, Rick and I taught undergraduate and graduate classes in art history together. He mentored me on the differences between teaching in the academy versus the public. These sometimes-chaotic courses led by two dynamic and very opinionated teachers brought students into the homes of collectors, artists’ studios, and behind the scenes of many museums. We shared a goal of wanting our North Texas community to engage with artists’ studios, and behind the scenes of many museums. We shared a goal of wanting our North Texas community to engage with the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This groundbreaking forum has led to the creation of numerous programs in the U.S. and internationally, keeping with just what Rick loved: partnership and leadership.

When I was invited to join the UTD Center for BrainHealth as the Director of Art-Brain Innovations, Rick encouraged my appointment. He immediately saw the direct connection between the arts and sciences and my expanded work on the Art of Observation, which connects neurological research with the experiencing and processing of art and the world around us. He would fiercely question me on the neuroscience of observing art and together we explored new approaches to art history.

Compassion for others was a major aspect of Rick’s life, and I was a beneficiary. Among my fondest memories of my friend are the many times when we were both recovering from illnesses, and he would call and invite me to go for a very slow walk in Greenway Parks. He could tell in an instant how I felt by the sound of my voice. One day, he responded and arrived at my door with a bouquet of brilliant red zinnias, a bag of summer red cherries, and bottle of rosé. We laughed, sipped wine, talked about life and art. The day was better because Rick was with me.

Rick’s tireless energy inspired me from the day I first met him in the 1980s at the Art Institute of Chicago until we said our last goodbyes. I see him smiling and pushing me to go for a very slow walk in Greenway Parks. As everyone knows, Rick was that unique person with an ebullient manner and brilliant mind who could never meet a stranger — and from whomever he met, he would pump out every drop of knowledge to stir into his pot, and what a pot it was! Rick had the striking ability to create huge and complex projects out of one idea, which often appeared in a midst of a conversation, most often around a table, while sharing his homemade frittata.

An Amazing Adventure...

Pierrette Lacour

I t was 2001, and I was in search of a job that I hoped would be fun and fulfilling, when I stumbled on what I would later discover was a dream for many. All I knew, barely, was his name, Brettell, which I was only able to link to a museum, not yet even to art history. The lure was the exciting idea of working for FRAME, a consortium of art museums, which I had always loved to visit, both in my native France and my adopted United States. For me it was the start of an amazing adventure which would last for only 20 years. When it came to an end with Rick’s passing, I would have been ready to carry on for many more years to come.

It all started with FRAME—the French Regional and American Museum Exchange—a consortium of major art museums in France and North America dedicated to promoting Franco-American cooperation in the cultural arena concerning museums, their collections and their professional staffs. FRAME was created in 1999 by Mrs. Elizabeth Rohatyn, the wife of the American Ambassador to France, and by Rick, who was its first director, and also the only person who knew enough about museums in America to be able to choose first 24 of them, and later eight more, to create this consortium. To make the idea work, Rick needed a French speaker to join the FRAME staff. Following a disastrous first try, Rick hired me for one week—this was in July 2001. That same year, the date in September that we all sadly remember, was the same day that the first art works were due to be shipped to Bordeaux for the opening of the first FRAME exhibition, “Made in the USA.”

Overnight the French decided to cancel the show, without calling Elizabeth or Rick! I remember spending three days and two nights on the phone with 30 museum lenders, the directors of the French and American museums, and much more. That was my baptism by fire, and how my career at the side of this incredible man was launched.

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The idea would then enter his mind, and the need to pass to action would soon follow—be it, Rick was the thinker and the creator, and not a good producer. He hated the details of turning his ideas into deeds and thus, we soon became a team. Following these conversations,
Rick Brettell believed in making things better, and he believed in the vital but often under-appreciated contributions of artists to their communities. His distinguished teaching career was not limited to the classroom; the projects that he jump-started throughout the community comprise a legacy of how to think outside the box.

He thought that establishing an artist residency in Dallas sponsored by UT Dallas was the solution to cross-pollinating the primarily regional art scene at the time with visiting artists, critics, and dealers, and that through the resulting creative capital and new relationships, an international profile would develop. Although Houston’s CORE Program, San Antonio’s Artpace and the Chinati Foundation’s residency in Marfa already existed, none of these included a partnership with a university. Also, a residency located downtown would provide an urban extension to the suburban UT Dallas campus, and connect it to the local working art community. So, despite his very busy schedule, Rick introduced the Canadian developer Jack Matthews to UTD’s School of Arts and Humanities. We were lucky. Matthews owned South Side on Lamar, a renovated 1913 building south of downtown Dallas, which housed 1,000 people in residential lofts. The UT Dallas Artist Residency began in 2003 in 5 rent-free lofts, which had gallery/ storefront type entrances. The program grew rapidly to include a total of 29 artists and presented countless events (both on site and throughout the metropolis): exhibitions, screenings, readings, artist talks, performances, open studios, as well as visits by curators. Collaborators included the McKinney Avenue Contemporary, the Dallas Museum of Art, Brookhaven Community College, and Southern Methodist University.

The program benefited from Rick’s extensive research and allow them to meet important people? Rick, again!

Rick believed in making Dallas a city for arts and artists, whom he encouraged and promoted from the moment he arrived here. He would spend many hours ensuring that artists would be recognized for their amazing and important work. He created the Wilcox Space, so that young local artists, unable to travel, could meet and draw from their peers from different cultures and sensibilities. I remember him asking me to lunch so we could discuss Southside… asking me? Didn’t I have other friends to discuss this new idea with? Yes of course, but I found out that Rick trusted my instinct more than I even realized. He was very disappointed when these projects had to close, but the few years of their existence were crucial for the city.

Dallas and its striking landscape would not be the same without Rick. He believed in bringing Dallas to the world’s attention, as he was there with Mrs. McDermott and others, meeting great architects and their projects which soon would define the city. Rick was the champion of Texas art, which he never saw as regional, but rather national and worthy of the world’s attention. At the end, he gave all he had to create MoTA, the Museum of Texas Art, and the Athenaeum at the University of Texas at Dallas. For Rick, the Athenaeum was his vision of what the university could become, the ultimate art destination in Texas for scholars from around the world as well as novice art lovers, in a complex mixing all art disciplines, and above all a unique library with his dream, a beautiful “Reading Room!” He worked on those projects until his last breath. My hope is that Dallas and UTD remember him and his visions, and will carry on with the same spirit in the future.

and many more. He was thrilled to receive artists from around the world in the two residencies he opened at Southside and then CentralTrak, so that young local artists, unable to travel, could meet and draw from their peers from different cultures and sensibilities. I remember him asking me to lunch so we could discuss Southside… asking me? Didn’t I have other friends to discuss this new idea with? Yes of course, but I found out that Rick trusted my instinct more than I even realized. He was very disappointed when these projects had to close, but the few years of their existence were crucial for the city.

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network of colleagues, and from his skill at putting together successful collaborations (think, for example, of FRAME, CISM, EDDIH, ISAAC, and his final tour de force, the UTD Athenaeum). Studio visits and public art talks by the likes of Philippe Vergne from the Walker Art Museum, Nato Thompson from Mass MoCA, and Trevor Smith of the New Museum in New York were all tapped from Rick’s rolodex. Exchanges occurred between UTD and South Side through the involvement of UTD faculty (including Greg Metz, John Pomara, Marilyn Waligore, Thomas Riccio, and Pierrette Lacour), UTD students as interns and the 06 Collective which presented programs at South Side, and some of the visiting artists who taught classes at UTD during their time in residence. Examples of events included Annie Murdock’s performance in a downtown Republic Bank window as the lunch crowd streamed by, Paul Slocum’s Treewave band performance in the unrenovated Casket Factory at South Side, Chad Sager’s wrapping of the support columns with string a la Marcel Duchamp in the South Side, and Phyllida Barlow site specific ‘Untitled’ sculpture for her installation, 2003.

Phyllida Barlow, who Rick introduced to Dallas as one of the first Artist in Residence at UTDallas Southside on Lamar Residency, is shown here working on her 2,000 sft. installation at UTDallas’s Main Gallery, Oct-Nov. 2003.

Exterior of Southside on Lamar, Site of UTD’s first artist residency

1409 Botham Jean Blvd. (S.Lamar)
Side Residency offered this dynamic in a microcosm. I was fortunate to be the program director of this endeavor. It was definitely a matter of learning on the job. There were rough edges, messy situations and conflicting goals, but also the exhilaration of pioneering new ideas and finding a thirst for it in the community. The timeline was fairly short enough to have been able to spend the last two years of my passage through UTD working with CentralTrak, but in all his endeavors, which were plentiful in number and, more often than not, grand in nature.

CentralTrak was not only a residency which served as a locus of interaction for the artists and their relationships but in all his endeavors, which were plentiful in number and, more often than not, grand in nature. Passage through CentralTrak could extend from a few weeks to up to a year for visiting artists, and from one semester to a few years for graduate students. For those of us in the latter category, the opportunity to sit and have exchanges with writers, creatives, and visionaries, I feel lucky about our city, our museums, our universities and ourselves.

The program ended in 2006. It included the following artists from the metroplex and other locales as noted: Phyllida Barlow (London), Kelli Connell, Carola Dreidemie (Argentina), Ryan Fitzner, Brian Fridge, Lily Hanson, Christopher Jaggers, Saska Jorda (Venezuela), Misty Keasler, Baseera Khan, Sun Doo Kim (South Korea), Stephen Lathiphosphon (Chicago), Audrey Lisemon-Monthis (France), Annie Murdock (New York City), Karina Nimmerfall (Venna), Titus O'Brien (Los Angeles), Shin Yu Pai, Fabian Peake (London), Robert A. Pruitt (Houston), Chad Sager (Houston), Ludwig Schwarz, Marjorie Schwarz, Sai Selvarajan, David Sequeira (Australia), Paul Stocum, Karneen Smith (Houston), Reynaldo Thompson (Quanzuabo), Kyle Wadsworth, and Chen Xinpeng.

It was disappointing to realize that the residency would not last, but we tried to leave the door open to future possibilities with documentation of our efforts: a catalog, an exhibition at the McKinney Avenue Contemporary, and conversations with potential funding sources. This came to fruition with CentralTrak, which became a vital and beloved part of the community for ten years and created the synergy for other creative projects to emerge in the neighborhood, such as Beehaus, The Reading Room, and Oliver Francis Gallery. Rick Brettell changed the way we thought about our city, our museums, our universities and ourselves.

The brilliance of CentralTrak—brilliance, no doubt, derived from Rick’s own—was the magic of Rick, who was able to foster the continuous procession of the artists on the other side of the hallway was a golden one—and, if rumor has it, in some cases even blossomed into long-term relationships. That was the magic of Rick, who was able to foster and create a series of settings, situations, and circumstances where connections and relationships could be generated, not only at CentralTrak, but in all his endeavors, which were plentiful in number and, more often than not, grand in nature.

But CentralTrak was not only a residency that benefited the creatives that passed through. An important aspect of the project, which served as a locus of interaction for the artists and their relationships could be generated, not only at CentralTrak, but in all his endeavors, which were plentiful in number and, more often than not, grand in nature. But CentralTrak was not only a residency that benefited the creatives that passed through. An important aspect of the project, and one of the reasons it became such a staple in the Dallas arts community, was the gallery space at the front of the premises, which served as a locus of interaction for the artists and their relationships could be generated, not only at CentralTrak, but in all his endeavors, which were plentiful in number and, more often than not, grand in nature.
between residents and the world. The gallery space at CentralTrak was not only host to a marvelous series of exhibitions, many of which were on the cutting edge and innovative in nature, but also served as a venue for concerts, readings, lectures, dance performances, and all sorts of gatherings which were the place to be on many a night between 2008 and 2017.

When I graduated, my time at the residency had to come to an end. It was a bittersweet moment, because I knew I would miss the place dearly. But there was a comfort in knowing that my studio space would be available for new people, some of whom were friends, to take benefit from the experience I’ve had within it. There is no doubt that my passage through CentralTrak was the high point of my life as a graduate student. It is the space where my vision as an artist came to maturity with the development of my signature installation work, and I owe that in great measure to Rick, for having created a space where artists like me could incubate and simmer to emerge as strong individual voices in the art world. It’s humbling to ponder that in some small way, Rick’s legacy lives on through my work. A few years ago, in 2017, it pained me to learn that CentralTrak’s time was coming to an end. The Phoenix had engulfed in flames once again, its ashes waiting for rebirth. I’m sure I’m not the only one in the Dallas art community who eagerly awaits the next iteration of Rick’s vision to come to fruition. For now, our mourning for Rick can only join the mourning for CentralTrak. My hope is that one day our grief gets some respite, with the Phoenix of CentralTrak rising out of its ashes to renew and continue Rick’s brilliant legacy.

Dis-Remembering
Rick Brettell
Re-Connecting the Dots and Crossing the Traks

Roger F. Malina

Gyorgy Kepes worked at the University of North Texas in Denton in 1944. There he wrote his influential book The Language of Vision. The exhibition Gyorgy Kepes: Paintings was held at the Dallas Museum of Fine Art in November 1958. This is but a few miles from the desk where I am writing these memories of Rick Brettell. After Texas, Kepes had migrated to MIT, where he established the Center for Advanced Studies; there I met him as an undergraduate physics student.

As I was interviewing for a position at the University of Texas at Dallas, Rick Brettell and I discussed the role of intellectual and geographic migrants, such as Kepes, on human history. We talked about, in addition, the crucial role of institutions ‘on the periphery’ driving the creative innovations that have shaped the cultural present. These of course include the Bauhaus, CAVS and UT Dallas. Rick helped convince me to migrate from a stimulating job in the South of France to... Dallas, Texas. An exemplar of the role of peripheries such as Dallas. No, the future was not invented in Silicon Valley.

Ironically my father, Frank Malina, had been a friend of Kepes, who had joined the founding editorial board of the Leonardo Journal in 1968. And my father was born in Brenham, Texas. I remember that he said “I left Texas as soon as I could in the 1920s, it was an intellectual desert. There was only one library within a few hundred miles.”

Brettell visited me in my parents’ home in Paris. We discussed the importance of transdisciplinary approaches in general, but also trans-institutional initiatives. For instance, Brettell founded the French Regional and American Museum Exchange (FRAME), a consortium of 32 museums dedicated to cultural exchange between France and North America. He was a master at overcoming turf wars.

In addition to FRAME, Brettell bridged the Dallas and Fort Worth art historian communities, and silo-ed institutions, from UT Arlington, the DMA, UNT, UT Dallas, the Crow Museum and beyond. He also championed hybrid colleagues such as Max Schich, a pioneer in the application of the science of complex networks to the humanities, including art history. Schich was engaging in multidisciplinary research in a landscape of bifurcating academic silos; he had crossed the tracks.
Max Schich comments:

Loosely quoting Barbara Stützel: Rick Brettell loved and supported those with dreams and optimism, who don’t worry so much about setbacks, who wouldn’t confuse enthusiasm with naivety, who seek and point out the good, who do not package old anxieties into restrictive advice for everybody else. I will never forget the glow in Rick’s eyes when he was curious if an idea would work out. We owe life to this glow in the eyes.

Which gets me back to reconnecting the dots and the necessity of crossing the tracks.

So to remember Rick, we must start by disremembering Brettell and Texas, where I first met him.

Brettell was the dreaming initiator of the CentralTrak artists residency program set up by UT Dallas. It was a temporary autonomous zone, to use Hakim Bey’s terminology, which successfully crossed the tracks between contemporary artists and art historians.

For instance, UT Dallas Professor Charissa Terranova led and directed CentralTrak as an art historian, but also as a curator of contemporary art scientists such as bio-artists. She serves as co-editor of Biotechne: Interthinking Art, Science, and Design, a book series at Bloomsbury connecting Brettell to Kepes to Dallas to Biotechne.

CentralTrak also ‘crossed the tracks’ by enabling residencies by graduate students, who are often treated as inferiors. CentralTrak is closed now, but it lasted almost as long as the Bauhaus.

Connecting the dots also often involves crossing the tracks, but, beware, words matter. In Texas a ‘railroad track’ is often a racist division between where the white folk live well and where the black folk barely survive.

The name “Central Track” comes from the rich history of Deep Ellum in Dallas, an area settled as a “freedmens’ town” by former slaves after the US Civil War. Because of the proximity of the railroad tracks, the Deep Ellum neighborhood was also known as “Central Track.” On one side of the tracks, wealthy white Texans lived and caught the trains. On the other side, African-Americans and some refugees, primarily Eastern European Jews, worked and operated businesses. Some of them, like Kepes at UNT beyond the Deep Ellum tracks, were refugees from the Nazi Holocaust.

I finish these disrememberances, by crossing the intellectual tracks and connecting the dots differently. I sit in the Edith O’Donnell Arts and Technology Building which also houses the Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History that Rick Brettell founded. The art historians are within walking distance from the contemporary artists, animators, gamers and hybrid art scientists like myself.

Rick Brettell helped create intellectual oases in Dallas and beyond the tracks. He was both a rainmaker, working with wealthy patrons in Dallas, and an intellectual hybrid whose work crossed the tracks of disciplines and institutions. And as a dream maker, he infected a number of us with the idea of recreating an “Athenaeum” here in Dallas, where future oases will flourish and welcome intellectual and geographic migrants, where crossing the tracks will be normal.


A Mutual Flourishing

Dennis M. Kratz

As seeds require a nurturing soil, so brilliance, in order to flourish, often needs the sustenance of a receptive and vibrant institutional environment. Rick Brettell found such an environment at UT Dallas, and both parties flourished. Rick joined the Arts and Humanities (A&H) faculty in the fall of 1998, an opportune moment for both him and the university. The School of Arts and Humanities, already committed to interdisciplinary and innovative education, was just entering a period marked by energy, experimentation, and expansion. There Rick encountered, for example, Professor Rainer Schulte’s revolutionary idea of translation as a conceptual model for education that transcends conventional boundaries. Founded by Schulte in 1978, the Center for Translation Studies has continued to expand its vision and impact. In 1998, other innovative academic programs and centers were beginning to emerge. The first seeds of a degree program designed to integrate the arts with engineering and advanced digital technology—and embed that union within a rich humanistic context—had been planted; in 2002, Tom Linehan, another visionary arts educator, would join the faculty to direct it to a level of success that would result in the creation of a new School of Arts, Technology and Emerging Communication. Concurrently, Professor Zsuzsanna Ozsvath was offering courses on the Holocaust that would lead to the creation of the Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies. Between Rick’s arrival in 1998 and 2020, other interdisciplinary centers arose, devoted to Latin America; to China and Asia; to philosophic and ethical issues associated with developments in science, medicine, and technology; and (of course) to art history. Rick not only absorbed this energy, but also intensified and endowed it with a vast new dimension. Other essays in this catalog focus on Rick’s multiple and transformative contributions to A&H and to the university: the Southside Residency, CentralTrak, international collaborations such as those in Naples and Nanjing, and of course the Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History (EOIAH). His presence and support also enhanced the credibility and strengthened support for these and other initiatives. Without his advice and interventions, the Visual Arts program would not have ascended to its current level of excellence; the Crow Museum of Asian Art would not be part of UTD; nor would the Barrett Collection; and we would not be anticipating the rise of an arts complex without his bold vision of the Athenaeum.

For me, however, Rick’s ultimate impact has a deeper philosophic dimension that I will try to explain by recalling a conversation that he and I had some years ago (after a reception at Jay Pack’s house celebrating the publication of Rick’s most recent book). Rick had given me a copy of his book, inscribed “Where would I be without UTD?” “Rick,” I replied, “where would UTD be without you?” Then we talked for a few minutes about his achievements, so far, at UTD. Rick observed that it was less important where UTD (or he) was than where it would go—and less important what it was than what it was becoming. That philosophy will be his grandest and most valuable contribution if we accept it, adopt it, and live it.
Innovating Art History
The Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History and Rick Brettell

Inaugurated in October of 2014, the Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History at the University of Texas at Dallas represents the shared love of art and art history between world-renowned art historian Rick Brettell and Edith O’Donnell, a generous Dallas patron of the arts. As Founding Director for what would be a mere five years, Rick Brettell’s leadership advanced the O’Donnell Institute (affectionately known as EODIAH) into new territory that put the Institute and UT Dallas on the map for art history. Shaped by Rick’s abilities and interests in forging new friendships, championing the history of art, and fostering the engagement of contemporary artists, Rick knew the work of practicing artists was of equal value to the historical canon of “the greats.” He continually discovered intersections of past and present that both informed his work as art historian and benefited local artists. Rick’s enthusiasm for art and art history is an essential part of a modern society and dedicated much of his life to increasing exposure of young people to the arts. With the gift of a $17 million endowment, the Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History and Rick Brettell set about to create what he called “the place for art history in North Texas and to make a global footprint as well.”

The result was a new institute of art history that Rick was delighted to introduce as “the first one in the early 21st century, the only one in the center of the United States, and the first one in the digital era.” Rick opened EODIAH as a small, nimble institute against a prevailing model of very large and traditional art history institutes. By drawing upon his expansive network of scholars, curators, artists, researchers, and students in art history, Rick crafted EODIAH as a gathering point and launchpad for innovative and interdisciplinary research. His alliances with the Dallas Museum of Art, the Nasher Sculpture Center, the Crow Museum of Asian Art, and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, among many other local institutions, brought working curators to teach UT Dallas students in both museum and university settings, and allowed academic art historians access to curatorial realms in ways that had never before been possible at UT Dallas.

The Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History truly came into focus with the construction of its main headquarters in the Edith O’Donnell Arts and Technology Building on the UT Dallas campus, designed by Cunningham Architects, and its research center at the Dallas Museum of Art, designed by Buchanan Architecture—both leading firms recruited personally by Rick. In planning these spaces, Rick explained, “What I wanted to do was to bring the most creative architects in the area to address the issue of how you study art and how you work together and what the relationship now is between the digital world and the world of books.” The resulting spaces reflect both Rick’s inviting affability and EODIAH’s aims: a mixture of contemporary space, orderly scholarship, and traditional warmth that act as “living rooms” for art historians, scholars, and artists in Dallas-Fort Worth communities.

Engaging Artists
Rick was a great supporter of practicing artists and his vision of EODIAH reflected an understanding of how local work informs a broader scope of community, and vice versa. EODIAH’s initial programs showed his interest in exploring new modes of connection between art and the sciences, including Art and Medicine, Conservation Science, Art and Biology, and Art and Cartography.

He committed EODIAH to the documentation and study of artwork by the most important artists working in Texas today, and filled the EODIAH offices with work by renowned contemporary artists including Gabriel Dawe, John Pomara, Stephen Laphihaspoph, and Martin Gheens. In 2018, EODIAH assumed stewardship of The Wilcox Space in Dallas, the Martin Gerwers. In 2018, EODIAH assumed stewardship of The Wilcox Space in Dallas, the Martin Gerwers, and in 2021 will present photos of her work at the Syrian World Heritage site of Palmyra.

Partnering for New Initiatives
Rick was equally talented in bringing global initiatives to North Texas. He forged partnerships with the Wildenstein-Plattner Institute (WPI) in New York and Paris, where he headed research for the multi-volume catalogue raisonné of the artist Paul Gauguin published in 2020. With Associate Director Dr. Sarah Koziolowski, he created partnerships with the Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte in Naples and Franklin University in Lugano, Switzerland to form the Center for the Art and Architectural History of Port Cities, which supports research and seminars on the city of Naples and the cultural histories of port cities. Together with The University of Nanjing in China and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, and with the support of the Terra Foundation for American Art, he founded the Institute for the Study of American Art in China (ISACC). A fully immersive experience, ISACC invites Chinese scholars to live in Dallas for one year, participating in the life of the O’Donnell Institute. Using Dallas as a home base, ISACC scholars travel around the U.S. visiting museums and lecture at symposia. ISACC supports the scholars’ return to China, where they have been able to teach American art history for the first time in Chinese universities.

Even amid a season of disruptions and collaborations, Rick began to envision a place on campus that would become a center for learning, research, and engagement with...
collections of art, later materializing as an all-inclusive arts complex at UT Dallas known as “the Athenaeum.” He worked tirelessly to bring works of art to UT Dallas and create a space for students, faculty, and scholars to learn. In 2018 he brought the 400 rare artworks comprising Barrett Collection of Swiss Art to UT Dallas in advance of their eventual donation, and in 2019 he heralded the Crow Museum of Asian Art’s transition to the university. He also established a large art library at EODIAH, assembled from donations of collectors’ private libraries and most importantly, the renowned Wildenstein-Plattner Institute collection of thousands of books and catalogs that go back centuries, all for North Texans to access in the study of art and history.

Never ceasing in passionate drive and far-reaching vision, Rick’s final projects show a continuation of his ability to entice entire cities into dialogues that position art at the forefront of cultural objectives. His plans for the Athenaeum and a Museum of Texas Art (MoTA), were cultural objectives. His plans for the Athenaeum and a Museum of Texas Art (MoTA), were designed to bring art experiences to North Texans in entirely new and inspiring ways.

Enriching Scholarship

Even as he transformed UT Dallas into a major center for art research, Rick was a beloved professor, providing a nurturing environment for UT Dallas masters and doctoral students and sending them out into the world with tangible new prospects. He brought scholars to Dallas from a UT Dallas masters and doctoral students and sent them on to universities around the world, gaining valuable experience. He worked tirelessly to bring works of art to UT Dallas and create a space for students, faculty, and scholars to learn. In 2018 he brought the 400 rare artworks comprising Barrett Collection of Swiss Art to UT Dallas in advance of their eventual donation, and in 2019 he heralded the Crow Museum of Asian Art’s transition to the university. He also established a large art library at EODIAH, assembled from donations of collectors’ private libraries and most importantly, the renowned Wildenstein-Plattner Institute collection of thousands of books and catalogs that go back centuries, all for North Texans to access in the study of art and history.

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CARRYING ON HIS VISION

Rick stepped down as Director of EODIAH in 2019 and was succeeded by Dr. Michael Thomas, then Director of the Center for the Study of Ancient Italy at UT Austin—a classical archaeologist, art historian, and native of Dallas. Rick was excited for Dr. Thomas to lead EODIAH as a representation of the local and international, and Dr. Thomas’s directorship of The Oplontis Project, a major international excavation of a Roman site near Pompeii, dovetailed beautifully with the Institute’s already-established presence in Naples. “Rick’s infectious personality was invaluable in growing the arts in Dallas,” said Dr. Thomas. “It was his dynamic disposition and his friendship with so many people that made all of his causes so successful.”

Under Rick’s directorship, EODIAH accomplished a great deal for both the discipline of art history in North Texas and the artists and scholars who make up its vibrant arts community—all part of fulfilling the mission encouraged by Mrs. O’Donnell, and by Rick’s own visions of making Dallas a celebrated cultural destination. With his absence still felt keenly, EODIAH’s outstanding faculty and scholars continue in his stead, exploring new intersections of visual arts, the sciences, and technology, and to build collaborations and exchanges so that Rick’s legacy of arts excellence will continue to flourish.

Understanding the cultural relevance of Asia

Dr. Brettell’s vision for the Crow Museum of Asian Art at The University of Texas at Dallas

Amy Lewis Hofland

Catalyst

“We are building a new museum complex at UT Dallas. Can the Crow Collection graft onto this?”

A short but meaningful email arrived in my museum inbox from Rick Brettell in November of 2017. Within a few days I found myself seated at a beautiful luncheon of French cuisine in Dr. Brettell’s “War Room”: walls lined with renderings, sketches and ideas for a future Athenaeum lining the walls of a conference room right in the heart of the Edith O’Donnell Institute for Art History.

All of the elements were in place for inspired futures: a delicious meal, a longtime friendship, Rick’s twinkle in both eyes, resources from both of our organizations to create more together: a delicious meal, a longtime friendship, Rick’s twinkle in both eyes, resources from both of our organizations to create more together: a complimentary collection of Swiss art from the Barrett family and a reading room. These elements were not what were most important, Rick had schooled me; rather, it is the learning that will happen in and around these collections: research, inquiry, socialization, cultural interchange and new ideas formed from being with books, art and human beings. We were talking about a deepening of the University’s commitment to the cultural experience, a deepening of how students at the University might form meaning and thought about the world, and a deepening of access to Asian art and culture for the communities around the University.

Trammell S. Crow, our museum founder and Board President said it best at a subsequent meeting and tour of the swiftly growing campus: “This is a no-brainer.”

Old Friend

Rick knew the Crow family and collections well. As our advising director in 1997–1999, Rick collaborated closely with Trammell and his mother, Margaret Doggett Crow, to work with Asian art curators and experts to form the corpus of our collection, and to establish the
Essays

strategic vision for our beginnings in the Dallas Arts District. As with all things, he challenged the Crows to do it well. He urged us to select works only fitting for a collection of the caliber of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and this high bar became our threshold. From about 8,000 works of Asian art sprinkled in hotels and office towers across the country, Rick, leading our curatorial team, selected just 611. These works formed the Crow Collection of Asian Art—the first Asian Art Museum in the southern United States. We opened to the public in December of 1998.

Over the years I would visit Rick often for advice. When the museum celebrated ten years, Rick connected me with the important collectors of Asian art in the state, forming the best, most serious elements of Texas Collects Asia in a series of five exhibitions and a major publication. As delegations from other museums visited Dallas, Rick was generous to always suggest that they visit the Crow Museum. He was a good friend to our museum, offering support and space to the Crow family, as we found our way from being the small private collection born of Trammell and Margaret’s passion for Asia, to becoming a major Asian cultural center for the City of Dallas and for all of North Texas.

Rick, like the best kind of friend, was our toughest critic and our most loyal supporter. His enthusiasm for our 2016 exhibition of Talavera from Puebla, Mexico, examining the global influences of Chinese taste on Mexican Ceramics, was invaluable. Simply put, the exhibition would have never happened, had Rick not included the Crow Museum in the seminal meeting of the International Museum of the Baroque with museum directors at a 2013 luncheon in Dallas. Rick didn’t invite visionaries to have lunch for the purpose of having lunch. Lunch, while always delicious, was secondary. Rick drew humans together to challenge us to be better and to change the future. This is what he called us together to do in 2013, and again in 2017.

Museum Builder

After several meetings and conversations, a decision was made to explore the possibility of a union between the Crow Museum and The University of Texas at Dallas. The leaders of the Crow Museum spent two months writing a position paper illuminating the assets of the near twenty-year-old museum: a collection of works numbering almost 1,200, a long-term lease in the Dallas Arts District, a library of more than 12,000 volumes, a healthy and sizable endowment, and two decades of equity and engagement with the arts and Asian communities in Dallas and beyond. The museum had long looked north: UT Dallas is in the heart of the geographic region where the Asian American communities continue to expansively grow. The student population is 43 percent Asian American and the University, with the Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History, was primed to form partnerships for research and publication on the collection. Rick saw all of this before anyone. A second location on campus would answer all of these wishes and more: library space, auditorium space and expanded gallery space to accommodate the 85 percent of the Crow Collection hidden away in storage. In the 1970s, Trammell’s father, the real estate titan Trammell Crow had presciently stated, “Asia is the future.” Rick heard the call.

By late spring of 2018, Rick and I were meeting often with the team he had formed two years prior, to develop a strategic vision for the Athenaeum. In June, I was paired up with Dr. Hobson Wildenthal to “make it happen.” I took
collections of Asian Art helped us through the challenges of an accelerated transition. Rick’s vision was coupled with a fierce capacity to stay grounded in the big picture: relentlessly reminding us to stay committed to the highest standards in the choice of architect (for the ages), scholarship (for the students) and curatorial content (for the world).

From this moment of arrival at the university as the planners of the future Athenaeum to Rick’s untimely passing in the summer of 2020, I knew that every meeting, conversation and idea was precious. This made the sunset of our friendship precious. Rick’s illness was my lesson to be present. I found myself a deep listener for his intent, ideas, and vision. And here we are.

The architectural program, informed by nearly four years of Rick’s research carries the rigor of his calling. The collectors who will follow the Crows, the Barretts, and the Horchows will be drawn to the credibility of Rick’s unparalleled intellect. The visitors to this museum—students, international families, and adults matriculating into lives with a greater understanding of how we are the cultural imprints to the world we hold ourselves to be. This is an idea worth grafting to.

By the end of the year, it happened. On January 1, 2019, all documents were signed and the Crow Museum—its collections, endowment, and long-term lease of the downtown Dallas location—were transferred to The University of Texas at Dallas, with the promise of a second location to be built on campus. Rick was indefatigable in his support this path; his speeches and papers ignited all of us around him to declare it, form it and be in this bigger, impossible future.

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was beyond anyone’s wildest imagination. Within a few months of the meeting at the Barry Whistler Gallery, John’s former studio and loft was transformed by the architect Corky Cunningham into a simple, quiet, serene venue in which John’s works could be exhibited. Barry organized the first exhibition, and Rick stepped in to curate the second one. The role of determining what to exhibit, how many exhibits to curate, and who might become involved as curators took on a life of its own. Meanwhile, I was working on the digital archive of John’s art, notes, and ephemera. Access to such an archive, in a digital format, afforded possible curators the opportunity to explore the whole body of John’s work, along with accompanying documentation, and to propose exhibits that piqued their aesthetic and intellectual interest.

Rick suggested that we publish volumes documenting each exhibition, complete with ancillary materials as well as critical essays. In March 2014 we enlisted Ed Marquand of Lucia|Marquand in Seattle to begin publishing what later became The Wilcox Series. By late 2014, the second year of the project, Rick had spearheaded the creation of the Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History at the University of Texas at Dallas (EODIAH), and he proposed a partnership between EODIAH and The Wilcox Space, creating a rich relationship between the work of the project and faculty and students at the Institute.

The six-volume Wilcox Series is a limited-edition series jointly published by The Ioannes Project, Boston, and The Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History, The University of Texas at Dallas. Copies will be distributed to major universities and museums when the series is complete.

Like so many of Rick’s projects throughout his career, he brought an inexhaustible level of creativity, energy, and intellectual curiosity to the work of The Wilcox Space. His enthusiasm for the project and Wilcox’s work was contagious. He brought in immensely talented people to the project such as Sarah Kozlowski, Pierrette Lacour, Benjamin Lima, Corky Cunningham, Bonnie Pitman, Gabe Ritter, Leigh Arnold, Darren Jones, Terri Thornton, Frances Colpitt, Karen Weiner, Mark Leonard and Laura Hartman, just to name a few. We drew from art historians who studied not only contemporary art but also medieval and nineteenth-century art, as well as museum curators, conservators, contemporary critics, and well-known gallerists. By the time we opened the sixth and final exhibition of John’s work in 2018, scores of talented and gifted people in the world of art and art history had in some way been involved.
in the project. For those who knew Rick or had worked with him on projects in the past, this was simply how Rick worked: he was a master weaver, bringing together people, drawing on their absolute best talents, all the while keeping one eye on the intricate design of the tapestry that was unfolding. His approach to The Wilcox Space was no different.

The Space itself was many things—a quiet place in which to enjoy a small rotating selection of John’s work, a laboratory, modern salon, a venue for discussions about John and his work, and a warm and inviting space in which friends, curators, scholars, and gallerists would gather for talks or small dinners. Occasionally, art historians or critics visiting Dallas and in search of a quiet place to stay would make The Wilcox Space their home for a few nights while they were in town. It was this sense of community accompanying the growth of The Wilcox Space that was so unique and special. Rick understood this; he encouraged it; and he, like all of us, thrived on it.

What evolved over the life of The Wilcox Space was a community of individuals, all energized by each other as the work of the project moved ahead. There was certainly a deep appreciation for John’s work itself, coupled with an excitement and curiosity that came from delving into materials that offered insights into not just his works, but also his life, his views on his art and his craft as a painter. This shared goal fostered a sense of camaraderie and excitement that was palpable when people gathered in the space whether for meetings, receptions or simply to view the work on exhibit. The whole enterprise, from my perspective as a clinical psychologist, had an element that one sees in children who are engrossed in and seriously pursuing their play, an endeavor which is both vital, nurturing, and enlightening. The British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, in the course of considering the importance of play in the human psyche, framed creative thinking as an intermediate area, a transitional space, in which the creative imagination is allowed to flourish and grow free from external constraints. The Wilcox Space and the community that sustained it had qualities of just such a transitional space. We created it without fully appreciating what would unfold, just like the process of play itself. We enlisted others into the enterprise, and they too seemed to relish the task at hand and often brought others to the project. In 2018, a full five years into the life of The Wilcox Space, Rick wrote an article about the project for the inaugural issue of the Athenaeum Review published by the School of Arts and Humanities and EODIAH, where in addition to relaying the evolution and scope of the project, he discussed his own experience of curating an exhibition of John Wilcox’s work in the space.

The work I did on the exhibition and the subsequent volume in the series devoted to the oeuvre of John Wilcox gave me a chance to look at regional art in completely new ways, and to have courage to get beyond established art historical forms that are, fundamentally, established by the art market. We learned that documentation is only the beginning of critical and historical understanding and that we all learn from the work ordered and discussed in new ways. This is not possible in museums, which need external verification and established knowledge before they can be experimental. The Wilcox Space brought art produced just decades ago into the realm of “art history.”

With Rick’s guidance and enthusiasm, The Wilcox Space stretched the boundaries of how one might contemplate and study art, how one might formulate a narrative about the life and work of an artist, and how the discipline of art history might expand its scope by immersing itself in the oeuvre and ephemera of an important but only recently deceased artist. The space was not a gallery with a commercial agenda, nor was it a museum driven by funding, budgets, and the constraints that surround organizing exhibits. It was a space, almost totally free from constraints, in which the sole goal was exhibiting and delving into a body of work driven by the intellectual creativity of an amazing group of talented individuals. It was a human space, one in which those who entered it could not only enjoy John’s work as curated by a range of talented curators, but also enjoy being with each other—discussing the work, enjoying the quiet of the space itself, or sharing a meal together. Such spaces for art, free from the constraints of institutional or commercial pressures, are rare. Rick realized this, and used the opportunity to push the boundaries of how art is not only understood and appreciated, but also how a historical narrative about an artist and the art he created could emerge in the context of such a space.
A visionary arts leader; a community asset

Vicki Meek

I first met Rick Brettell in 1988 when I was executive director of D-Art Visual Arts Center. He had recently taken over the Dallas Museum of Art and from the very start of his tenure, made it abundantly clear that he intended to expand the reach of the institution far beyond what it had been in the past. He reached out to arts administrators like me, who were working with primarily local artists, to see how the DMA and their respective institutions and organizations could work together. Having come from the City of Dallas City Arts Program as its first supervisor of community arts development, Rick was speaking my language and exemplified what I had hoped to see all the major arts institutions do. We immediately hit it off, both because he was brilliant at seeing natural connections, but I also think he was attracted to the fact that I had come to Dallas eight years prior from Connecticut where he had spent his Yale years (and both my sisters were Yale alums!).

One of the most admirable things about Rick Brettell as the director of a major art museum was his deep and sincere interest in the makers of art. Unlike the previous director, Rick found ways to include local artists in various programs and projects, eliciting their input as to how to make the museum more responsive to their needs. Rather than creating barriers to access to the museum, Rick built bridges to the local arts, both the visual and performing, as well as new patrons from communities of color who had never attended the museum in great numbers. As I was attempting to open up D-Art to a more diverse audience and artist community, Rick was doing the same for our city’s only major art museum. He was a gifted fundraiser, so philanthropists like Nancy Hamon generously donated to the Dallas Museum of Art, allowing Rick to expand offerings from the visual arts of the Americas, both North and South, as well as the arts of Africa, in ways we had never before seen. His scholarly approach to exhibitions meant the museum also began to prioritize publications as a means of extending public knowledge around specific artforms and artmakers. I found all this new direction both exciting and provocative, and a wonderful companion to the work I was doing at D-Art Visual Arts Center. How ironic that the person that put Dallas Museum of Art on a path to greatness has been expunged from its history on the official Dallas Museum of Art website!

Our tenures at our respective institutions were almost identical, and we continued to cross paths as we followed other directions with our careers. Rick migrated to academia and, after a couple of detours, returned to the City of Dallas Office of Cultural Affairs to manage the South Dallas Cultural Center. Once there, Rick and I were able to reconnect through our mutual love of innovative arts practices. I was impressed with the ways in which Rick shaped an institution like the University of Texas at Dallas into a center of intellectual importance, first by founding the Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Museums, and later by attracting the $17 million gift from donor Edith O’Donnell to create the Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History (EODIAH), and later, the Athenaeum project.

How easy it would have been for Rick to simply settle down as a distinguished professor of art history at his new university home, but that would have been the antithesis of who Rick Brettell was as a man. What I admired most about Rick was his ability to blur the lines around scholarship and community engagement. This was another of the areas where our lives merged. We could talk endlessly about ways in which art transformed community, as we both strived to turn this theory into practice. I dare say Rick expanded numerous students’ perception of how the history of art should be interpreted, based on his granting them exposure to more than simply the academic facts about art. Just as Rick saw the importance of engaging local artists in all aspects of his teaching practice, he also was crystal clear about the fact that art did not occur in a vacuum and all artists were shaped by their life’s experiences. I think it was this last observation that prompted him to make his last major organizational effort the Vicki Meek

MOTA Seminar at offices of Cunningham Architects, September 16, 2019.
Photograph Jouette Travis
creation of a museum that would examine the complexity of the art of Texas. This last project brought Rick and me back together in a formalized working relationship that we hadn’t had since my days at D’Art Visual Art Center. The Museum of Texas Art, or MoTA, was a dream that Rick had to elevate to create a center that could make accessible the vast treasure of Texas art currently unseen by most art lovers. Rick approached me in 2019, before his untimely death, to help shape the future, should another visionary wish to step up and take the reins!

When I think of all the innovative projects that Rick Brettell initiated in North Texas, I am eternally grateful for his vision and dedication to the visual arts in our region. So many of the state universities that provide today’s scholars with their scholarly endeavors, were because of Dr. Richard “Rick” Brettell having graced us with his presence and brilliance. I will be forever grateful for our friendship and professional association, and thank him for allowing me to be a part of his creative think tank.

Benjamin Lima

Athenaenum Review
Present at the Creation

We need a review!” Rick was vigorously and incisively making this case, as I sat in his living room in the spring of 2017. At this point, the Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History had been in existence for a couple of years already, and Rick was continuing to think strategically about how to continue to grow and cultivate the institute’s reputation and public presence. Conversations with other colleagues had helped to confirm Rick’s view that publishing an in-house journal would be a useful complement to the institute’s other activities, especially helping to contribute to its profile outside Dallas. Certainly, established art history institutes (e.g., the Clark, the Getty, or CASVA) maintained significant publication programs, and similarly, publishing would be one important sign of the new institute’s seriousness. However, the word that Rick habitually used to define his envisioned publication—“the review”—was also a sign of what he envisioned doing differently than business as usual. I had heard him voice a fundamental (and widespread) criticism of academic publishing: that the canonical peer-reviewed journal article—the coin of the realm in academic publishing: that the canonical peer-reviewed journal article—the coin of the realm in academia—was, all too often, slow to appear, expensive to produce, and worst of all, dry, boring, and completely inaccessible to everyone outside a tiny circle of fellow specialists. Rather, Rick believed that academics had a profound responsibility to share their knowledge and understanding with the general public—which was why he set aside significant hours of valuable time to give public lectures, and to write for the Dallas Morning News. Therefore, the new publication would be a “review,” like the New York Review of Books, that could be picked up and profitably read by anyone, inside or outside of academia, who was curious about art history. The review would be public-facing, and open-access: free to anyone to read. Thanks to a brilliant visual identity created by Cassini Nazir and taken over by Katrina Saunders, the review would be beautiful in appearance, and convey both seriousness and openness. There would be no jargon, no tedious “inside baseball” quibbles about minor points of scholarship, and no online paywall. In its pages, prominent academics would write about important new books, exhibitions, and performances as they might do as guest stars in the New York Times Book Review: crisply, concisely, and engagingly.

Always thinking about the big picture, Rick recognized that the review would be an essential mechanism to help connect the O’Donnell Institute to the broader academic community of UT Dallas (and beyond). Working together, Rick and the equally far-seeing Dennis Kratz, then Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities, created a complicated but workable structure in which the review would be jointly published by the O’Donnell Institute and the School of Arts and Humanities, with significant support from the School’s associated Centers. (Their respective successors in office as of 2019, dean Nils Roemer and director...
Michael Thomas, have continued to tirelessly encourage and support the growth of *Athenaeum Review*.

Rick, flattering, saw fit to recruit me to apply for the job of editing this new publication. Why? I was an art historian who had already shown a commitment to writing for the general public (in fact, quite at the expense of those peer-reviewed journal articles), and I happened to be available. When I interviewed for the job in summer 2017, Nils Roemer, director of the Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies, and Ming Dong Gu, director of the Confucius Institute, were encouragingly supportive of the plan, as they have continued to be since then. Roger Malina, longtime editor of *Leonardo* and head of the ArtSciLab, offered priceless advice on how to manage the relationship between print and digital media, and made possible the creation of the unexpectedly popular *Athenaeum Review* podcast. All of these individuals joined the other directors of research centers in the School of Arts and Humanities to constitute an editorial board for the review.

Rick’s constant support helped guide the review along the path from initial concept approval to real, tangible existence. After we settled on a 10 x 7.25-inch, perfect-bound format with a glossy cover that could stand alongside such exemplars as the *New Criterion*, Rick saw the value of going one better, with full-color illustrations, expertly and efficiently printed by Sherry Perry at Alphagraphics. After I unsuccessfully proposed over 100 possible names for the new review, to no avail, Rick’s concept of “the Athenaeum” immediately won over all influential stakeholders, and it immediately became *Athenaeum Review* thereafter.

His own contributions to the Review (alas, too few) were cannily well-chosen, as well as being both deeply insightful and fluently readable (how many authors can really cover all those bases at once?) In his three articles (on the idea of the Athenaeum, the Wilcox Space, and the JFK and 9/11 Memorials, respectively), Rick helped to elaborate his broader vision for art history, to which this catalogue attests, and to which the O’Donnell’s lent their magnanimous support: a public, vital, and active field, which everyone can benefit from and enjoy. He also persuaded a few of his visiting distinguished friends, including the likes of Suzanne Blier, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Yve-Alain Bois, Thomas Gaehghtens, and Jorge Lozya—that is, an absolute A-team of world-class art historians—to patiently sit down and be interviewed by me for our fledgling podcast.

I think Rick was, justifiably of course, as proud as anyone when the review began to cultivate an audience among both the UT Dallas community and the public at large. With only small amounts of nudging, we obtained contributions from both intramural and extramural authors. Our first two (modestly) viral articles, by Allan Guelzo on Robert E. Lee, and Gary Saul Morson on “the problem with happiness psychology,” were widely shared online and attracted much comment.

Of course, I wish Rick were here to help the review face the challenges encountered by any such new enterprise. Although a lean operation as magazines go, the review still represents a substantial commitment of resources to a single, new project. The print journal appeared amidst the ongoing economic crisis of print media in general— is it still worth producing print issues, however beautiful and substantial, as everything moves online? And the review’s very nature as a public-facing, general-interest periodical means that it is not easily justified by the narrowly utilitarian calculus of tenure and promotion. But Rick’s example continues to encourage all of us to keep it going. Calling it “the Brettell review” would of course not do justice to the efforts of the many people (only a few of whom are mentioned here) who brought it into existence. But without Rick’s vision, competence, and ability to bring new things into existence through sheer willpower and creative brilliance, the review certainly would not exist—just one more good thing that he added to the world, and left for the rest of us to enjoy.

They can all be read online, at [athenaeumreview.org/contributor/richard-r-brettell](athenaeumreview.org/contributor/richard-r-brettell).

*ARTIST REFLECTIONS*
I remember the first time I met Rick. It was in 1999, and he was the professor for my first graduate course at UTD, entitled Painting as Performance. At the time, my paintings meshed together my fascinations with ants and with photographic surrealism. But I wanted to loosen up. With Rick Brettell, that happened. We could plan a series of ant-swarm gestural abstractions, talk about art criticism and history, deconstruct each other’s life stories, and follow with the best way to make a chicken broth—all in one hour. Rick inspired, encouraged, and demanded. He pushed me to explore and read about everything. As the best college advisor of all time, Rick helped plan my first trips to Germany, England, and France. He taught art within the big picture. He helped me go beyond myself—to keep my own compass as the ultimate guide for direction. I will forever be grateful for the support of his passionate voice.

Energetic. Competent. Rick was the greatest lecturer in the world! In constant motion, Rick saw the artist as an unlimited force that opened up universes. A writer, thinker, historian, museum shaman, musician, and maker—Rick expanded minds, and seen in his light, the world will always have the potential to be made afresh.

Rick Brettell was a force in the Dallas art community since he first took the position of Director of the DMA in 1988. During that time, he not only engaged the museum’s patrons and board members, he also engaged the artists of the community, while lending his influence toward helping us get projects realized.

In 1990, Cindy Hurt and I began a campaign to mount an artist-organized exhibition in a raw warehouse in Deep Ellum. When we presented our idea to Rick, he immediately picked up the phone, calling prominent collectors for financial support of our exhibition, The Vessel. With his help, we raised enough funds to refurbish a gallery space in the raw warehouse, insure all the work in the show, design and print a catalogue, and open with a large party to honor the donors and artists. This one story is just an example of the next three decades of Rick’s involvement with artists in Dallas. His enthusiasm, and his focus on our community, never waned.
I will never forget entering a small alternative space and artists’ residency in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 2007 to see—on its last day—an exhibition of paintings by a young artist I had never before encountered. As a middle-aged art historian and museum professional—in town lecturing at the Milwaukee Art Museum on Camille Pissarro—I had become accustomed to my own jaded responses to new work... “Do we really need any of this?” I typically thought. But this time, it turned out that I was completely enchanted and, at the same time, mystified by an extraordinary group of paintings by Peter Barrickman, and something happened to me that had not occurred in fifteen years: I desperately wanted to own one.
Reflections of the paintings. Never mind that there were no free walls at home in Dallas, and that my university office was chock-a-block with paintings by my students. I wanted one of the paintings VERY MUCH, and I committed on the spot to buy it and to have it sent to Dallas. When it arrived some weeks later via FedEx, I was again nervous about cutting into its cardboard-box container, for fear that it had all been a mistake. Yet when the painting was at last free, it was even more dazzling and exciting than I had remembered...and I remembered my mantra as Curator of European Paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago years ago that, when the second sight of a work of art one loved on first encounter is better than the already exaggerated mental image of it, BUY IT. But this time it was not a Dirk Bouts or a Franz Snyders or a Nicolas Largellière or a Claude Monet for the Art Institute, but a Peter Barrickman for me.

The painting is called Rhineland and, because there was no room at home when it arrived, I installed it in my university office, where it receives powerful side light in the morning from a wall of glass. What I realized is that it represents a landscape alternatively lit and in darkness, the top of which could be the bottom and the converse. It is also alive with hundreds of carefully cut-out—and generally tiny—collage elements of painted canvas, pasted in precisely the right location on the already painted support canvas, meaning that it was “painted” and then “collaged” and then “repainted” and then “re-collaged” in a dizzying dance of color and form. The old cliché—“I could look at it for hours”—has morphed from hours into weeks and now years, and I cannot even begin to fathom the painting’s complexities. Yet, for all of that, it is a PLEASURABLE complexity, and everyone who looks at it with me becomes an instant art pal who joins in a quest to “explain” the painting and its title.

Rick Brettell was my hero. And now his legacy is heroic.

Rick lived and breathed art—especially architecture and photography, passions he and I shared. And this is how our collaborations happened.

1988—Dr. Richard Brettell, Director of the Dallas Museum of Art, began the Friends of Photography. I learned about photographers and their work, both worldwide and locally, living and dead, edited the group’s newsletter, and made lifelong friends.

2000—Rick curated my exhibit Sacred Space: Man and the Divine in Mexico, Guatemala and Southwestern United States, for the Institute for the Study of Earth and Man at Southern Methodist University. With architect Gary Cunningham to design the show and a group of SMU scholars to help select photos and write essays, he set up a “war room,” wallpapered the walls with huge test photos, and installed a model of the Hall of State. The project became a giant exhibition of over 200 photographs, that filled the entire Hall of State at Fair Park during the State Fair. Quin Mathews made a film with music especially written for the project. We had guided tours, an audio tour, and there were thousands of visitors hailing from Texas and all over the world. We installed a church façade of photographs reaching 40 feet from the Great Hall floor to the ceiling on scaffolding imported from Mexico.

Carolyn Brown, The Sweeper at Temple of Karnak, Egypt, 1989
Photograph, 49” x 58” Framed
Courtesy of the Artist ©carolynbrown

CAROLYN BROWN
City—without touching the historic walls and ceiling. Many images were enlarged to 30 feet long. We had a massive image of the dismembered Goddess Coyolxauhqui image from the Templo Mayor in Mexico City on the floor, near a maze-room where viewers could wander among golden church retablos made up of large, back-lit-transparencies.

2005—I was a part of the Meadows Museum exhibit on Architect Mark Lemmon and his works. We worked with Director Ted Pillsbury and a team of experts to create a show of huge photos and floor plans of Mark Lemmon architecture. The Meadows did a beautiful catalogue of the show.

2014—The Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History was founded at the University of Texas at Dallas with a generous endowment from the arts patron Edith O’Donnell under the leadership and vision of Dr. Richard Brettell. I was honored to become a part of the Institute when I willed my photographic archives to the Institute upon my death.

2017—The Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History opened a Research Center at the Dallas Museum of Art, and had there three progressive installations of my work, including The Ancient Middle East; The Tiled Churches of Puebla, Mexico; and Iznik Tiles of Istanbul, Turkey.

2019—A wonderful retrospective of my photography at the SP/N Gallery was curated by Lauren LaRocca.

2021—It is an honor to be a part of the Richard Brettell event, and to honor our art hero. The importance of the Institute, and the legacy of Rick Brettell, will continue for generations at UTD—exactly as Rick envisioned.

On Thursday, May 7, 2020, at 2:37PM, Rick wrote to me:

Now am given 2-3 months... before hospices. Tra la

How like Rick.

We first met in 1977, Rick was at UT Austin, I at UT San Antonio. The next year we both left Texas for Chicago, Rick to curate at the Art Institute, I to begin teaching sculpture at the University of Chicago. We were so young, I never expected life to end.

Rick was my life-long friend.

Two years after arriving in Chicago, I spent a year in Italy. On my way to Rome, I fell in love with Watteau in the Louvre. I abandoned abstract sculpture and began a long self-education slog to paint representationally.

At some point, back in Chicago I painted, unironically!, a horizontal ten-foot painting of two clown-capped, naked, embracing figures paraphrasing Courbet’s Le Sommeil.

Rick came to the studio, looked at the painting and commented, though the painting was quite large, a scale curiosity brought to light, released, a miniature. The insight shocked me, it was a thematic impulse at the deepest level that would underpin my expressive oeuvre throughout my career.

As we boys ate dinner that evening, Rick mischievously plotted to hang the picture in the Great Hall on the upper floor of his Art Institute (on a closed day) so we might see how it would hold up in the collection. Rick was sure it would compare very favorably indeed; I wasn’t so sure.

Rick was a deeply meaningful friend to artists; he understood impulse, urgency, and intuition, he knew us, really knew us, and cared.

I am ever grateful for his insights, his scholarship, his friendship, and all that truly means.

Over the course of his last year, we were in touch, often daily. Rick asked if I would send him the attached painting. Carol has it now.

For me, in grief and love, the painting, repeats, tra la, tra la, tra la...
This photograph, which Rick acquired for the UT Dallas collection immediately upon seeing it at Nan’s exhibition opening at the Goss-Michael Foundation in Dallas on the evening of September 14, 2017, is exemplary of his steadfast commitment to nurturing the fruitful cross-pollination of art history and contemporary art, so well attested throughout this catalogue. To understand the many layers of meaning in this image, so adroitly captured by Nan, we must go back to 1562, when the Benedictine monks of the San Giorgio Monastery in Venice commissioned Renaissance painter Paolo Veronese for a 22- by 32-foot canvas for their refectory (dining room), then newly built by architect Andrea Palladio. Depicting the event at which, according to John’s gospel, Jesus rescued the embarrassed hosts by miraculously turning water into wine, Veronese’s Wedding Feast at Cana intricately arranges over 100 wedding guests around the central figure of Jesus, who is identifiable by his frontal, iconic pose, and who is two rows behind a figure dressed in white, traditionally identified as the artist himself, playing a stringed viola da braccio.

We are not, however, looking directly at Veronese’s painting here. In 1797, Napoleon’s army plundered the picture and removed it to France, where it still hangs in the Louvre today. Fast-forward to the 210th anniversary of the looting, on September 11, 2007, and a highly realistic digital facsimile of the painting was unveiled, to hang in the original location in the refectory in Venice, where Nan encountered it in 2017, and was inspired to make the photograph that now hangs in the present exhibition. Paolo, 5 giugno 2017 is a testament both to the countless hours spent by the team from Factum Arte, working on scaffolding in the Louvre to create their highly convincing facsimile, and to the exact moment in June 2017 when Nan obtained a precious fifteen minutes alone with it, to study and photograph.

To the left of Paolo the musician, we can see how the reflected light exactly registers the imperfections of the surface, as well as the horizontal scars where Napoleon’s men sliced the canvas into pieces to transport it. The photograph’s borders crop out the majority of the canvas, allowing us to focus more intently on the set of figures in front of us, instead of being overwhelmed by the vast throngs in the original. All of these details demonstrate how photography both captures and makes its own reality—a reality that is not simple, but complex and subtle, and is also distinct from the respective realities of painting and facsimile “underneath” the present photograph. Sophisticated reflections on these questions are the hallmark of Nan’s work throughout her 2017 Goss-Michael exhibition, and throughout her career. Paolo also testifies to the fruitful relationship between Nan and Rick, that developed during the years in which she worked with him in his capacity as art critic, first during Nan’s time as editor at large at FD Magazine, and after that as consulting arts editor at the Dallas Morning News. (I benefited from this same connection, as Rick introduced me to Nan, which eventually led to my writing art criticism for Nan at the News too, after Rick left.) Nan writes:

Rick was a dear and generous friend who, even though he was one of the most energetic and busiest people I’ve ever known, always had time for others. I will always appreciate his vast knowledge, passion and kindness. Truly an extraordinary man… and one I was privileged to have known.

Watching the play of light on the figures, we might first be captivated by the surface, and then be brought back in time, as this single image registers the decades and centuries, from 1562 and 1797 to 2017 and now 2021: a gift from Rick and Nan to UT Dallas and to posterity.
Rick Brettell was a genius at inspiring people’s creativity. In 2003, he told me, "You should make a play about Paul Gauguin. You ARE Gauguin!" Rick’s enthusiasm prompted me to read Gauguin’s books, many of his letters, and articles he wrote for Le Sourire, his newspaper in Tahiti and the Marquesas. I agreed that his writing was phenomenal and that it would be a great challenge to play him. The more I read, the more I saw myself in Gauguin, and not only his luminous side and his transcendent art. Glorious as his writing is, he also struck me as an unreliable narrator. My experience of self-observation had made my dishonesty with myself painfully obvious. Like Gauguin, hadn’t I used my narcissistic perception of myself as a “great artist” to justify behaving like a schmuck? His abandonment of his family, his treatment of women, his appropriation of indigenous culture, his grandiose pronouncements about spirituality—all of these hit close to home.

I taught a UTD grad class on Gauguin, and Rick gave two lectures with slides, which were astonishingly insightful, iconoclastic, and fun. He played some Scriabin on the classroom piano to underscore his deeply emotional responses to the art.

For my solo show, I translated and adapted Gauguin’s writings and assembled a textual collage, juxtaposing his words with projections of his art. Video was projected on multiple screens and also onto my body. I also used rod puppetry and shadow play. The production plays with the conventions of tableau vivant. Sometimes the text, projection, and action illustrate each other, and often they collide in a dialectical relationship from which new meanings emerge. Sometimes the juxtaposition of elements is ironic, so that the images and actions belie and confront Gauguin’s self-mythologizing language. The play celebrates the artist as a complex shadow figure, reflecting the luminosity and the darkness in oneself. I toured the solo version, Gauguin’s Shadow, nationally, and Dallas critics selected it as “Best Play of 2004.”

Using the same text and video, I directed an ensemble version, Gauguin’s Paradise, with students at UTD. Rick brought the Kimbell Museum director Timothy Potts to attend the show. They told me that it was “the best performance about an artist that we’ve ever seen.” The Kimbell later produced my solo Gauguin’s Shadow in conjunction with the groundbreaking Gauguin and Impressionism exhibition that Rick co-curated. His recorded tour was revelatory, and it was a rare experience to see the original artworks right before performing.

Rick invited me on an enlightening tour of the Boston Museum’s Gauguin Tahiti mega-exhibition, which he gave to a busload of people.
affluent Texans. I was impressed by how he related to the super-rich with the same care, respect, and kindness that he gave to penniless students, colleagues, and artists. Thanks again Rick, for your extraordinary generosity of spirit!

A fourteen-minute collection of excerpts from Gauguin’s Paradise, included in the present exhibition, can also be viewed online at vimeo.com/581630705, password: Gauguin

ANNABEL DAOU

Rick was a man who listened to everything, and paid attention to everything. Maybe it’s fitting that my memory of Rick will always be connected to his voice. I hear it now as I write this: a voice filled with excitement, joy, and a profound sense of the humor of life. His voice rings out across the divide and reaches so many corners of the world—so many people whose lives he touched.

Gabriel Dawe, Plexus C16, 2015
Installation: Thread, painted wood, and hooks, 6’ x 8’ x 14’
Located at the EODAH Collection, ATC Building, UT Dallas
Two years ago I contacted Richard Brettell (on David Carrier’s advice—there is a wonderful conversation between them in the Brooklyn Rail) to propose that his portrait be included in my great project, The Visionary Academy of Ocular Mentality. This consists of about ninety portraits of the most important living art historians, philosophers and scholars, along with their written contributions (it was later published by the German publisher De Gruyter, in 2020). Rick’s answer was: “I am very happy to participate in this project—largely because I very much like your portraits from photographs (in both senses ... like them from the evidence of photographs AND marvel that they are made from photographs) ... there is a low-rez one taken by a good friend in a restaurant while we dined together, and the other a higher-resolution ‘selfie’ that gives you more visual information. Hope you can, using the two of them, make something that amuses.”

Although I had never met Rick, I already knew him as a great scholar and art historian of French Impressionism, and as the highest authority on Paul Gauguin and Pissarro. A long and intense dialogue began between us via email, as old and close friends, on art, on portraiture, on Caillebotte or Vuillard, on life, for dogs (we were both lovers of our pets), on architecture, on some famous directors of museums and presumptuous scholars, on Fred Licht or Ivan Albright or Philip Johnson, on American art collecting, etc. When I showed him his portrait, Rick was delighted and, as always, commented on it with brilliant insights:

“I love it ... the idea of an art historian squinting into the light, therefore shown without eyes, and with prints of light on the blue glasses is WONDERFUL to me ... with teeth (mine are like walrus tusk enamel because I drink so much coffee!) a rare occurrence in formal portraits, with glasses and “seeing aids,” with mirrors and windows (the two principal metaphors for “the picture”) and an issue raised with reflected light in my glasses of the world beyond picture, with the differences—manifest as they are—between painting and photography, with painting as an act of friendship and with memories—all of the encounter that produced the photograph that inspired the painting, and with my own role in the creation of artist’s self-portraits dealing with identity and aging ... you and Hals and Henri are all characters in my little pictorial dance. I am defining myself through your portrait as the “comic spirit of art history.” You are Mr. Monochrome—and the prince of aging flesh.”

He then wrote a wonderful essay on the portrait for my book, and he found the money for the publication. Rick was a person who truly loved art and artists, and also helped them find important commissions (I painted the portrait of one of the greatest arts and educational patrons of Dallas, Margaret McDermott, commissioned by Mr. Harlan Crow). I am infinitely grateful to Rick for this. When Rick informed me of his cancer and his very serious illness which was getting worse and worse, I was shocked. Furthermore, the beginning of the global pandemic made everything even more sad and difficult. He continued to discuss art with me, always with the same great passion and strength. I painted for him, as my personal tribute, a small painting about Paul Gauguin that he liked very much: “The man in the portrait is a little confused and in shock. If he was ever like that, he would NEVER have wanted us to know ... the paint is beautiful, complex, and subtle ... Brotherhood in morphine.”

In our last emails, Rick, after seeing my painting on George Floyd’s death, proposed to me: “I am thinking of a series—some unintentional martyrdoms and the others principled martyrdom, where one is tortured because of beliefs: me think. Not all contemporary... One of the very greatest martyr paintings, Francisco de Zurbaran, The Martyrdom of Saint Serapion, 1628.”

I miss Rick very much—a great loss, and an irreplaceable, sincere friend and mentor.
When Rick Brettell first came to the DMA, he gave a lecture on “A Day in the Country,” in which he mentioned that Impressionist landscapes typically left out the very thing that had transformed France into the bread basket of Europe—farm machinery. Tractors became a favorite image of mine, along with barns and fields. Tractors help me find what is omitted (in this case, racism—see the Leonard Cohen quote on the silo). Theological eruptions are shot through the narrative that is always behind my sculpture; it is quite maximalist and I suppose it qualifies as concrete mysticism.

Rick and I had a salt and light relationship that thrived on creative tension. When we worked together at the DMA he trusted me to assess a situation and tell him the truth. After leaving the museum world, I resolved to make art again, and he was scared to see it (for one with such aplomb, if Rick got confined, he’d flee like a skittish deer). But he did see it, and offered me an exhibition at the MAC in 2010. In the catalogue he wrote that “the work is so homey and funky that it gives any modernist hives.” One piece in that show, a green typewriter, included a tiny John Deere tractor, and a Frida Kahlo painting of a wounded deer. In the catalogue Rick wrote: “The fragility of Geyer’s work is extreme, because she pushes the medium of porcelain to its...”
Physical limits, creating thin sheets of paper, long brittle brushes and pens… and numerous complex objects with so many small protrusions that they almost invite breakage. In certain cases, we feel that, if we breathe on them, they will break. Her green typewriter with a jaunty red bow (proving that it is meant to be a gift) is “typing” a sheet of paper with one of Frida Kahlo’s animated self-portraits, and this is so thin that it barely made it unbroken from the kiln. Oddly, the very idea of porcelain’s fragility is part of its appeal to Geyer, who effects such a casual attitude toward her creations that she is perfectly capable of repairing them, altering them, or rethinking them when a crucial element breaks.

Rick accepted “Typo?” as a gift, and it did break at some point. I find it to be a felix culpa, because Kahlo’s poor wounded deer needed to be torn off. On the front of the typing paper it says “Look in the barn.” During the 2020 lockdown I finally made a toy barn, a “whopper-jawed” centerpiece for a Thanksgiving-at-the-farm story. Adaptations from art history appear here (Rick demanded a list of those adaptations in my work, now up to 300 plus). In the toy barn story, my Chlora character (whom he insisted was me) goes into the barn to collect toilet paper. An ice storm has frozen the barn’s facade into the ominous tympanum over Notre Dame Cathedral. The stacked rolls of hay/toilet paper shiver in the silence. Chlora manages to go beyond judgment and enters the barn where a verdant vision sparkles like a Byzantine mosaic. It reminds me of the awe in Rick’s eyes when he looked at art.

Rick was a tough critic and prone to hyperbolic praise. Yet, he understood the fragility of an artist’s psyche. He kept me from burning my sketchbooks once. I asked if he was a secret artist himself, as he had such instincts about technique and the creative process. Rick came to see my immersive exhibit in the Nelli-Cochran House Museum in Austin in March 2020. Awe appeared and he announced he would now write about my work in a whole new way. That was the least of the reasons he needed more time. Three days after he died, a stag appeared in my yard for the first time. It sat awkwardly on the ground, held its head high and pranced around. Then it stared me down, turned quickly and leaped over the fence. Later it ate up all the ivy, destroyed a Japanese maple, and crapped everywhere. I kinda think it was Rick, and I find it to be a profound sign of hope.
facilitated as being eye-openers regarding how the museum art world functions.

It seems that everywhere Rick went great things happened. With his enormous mental and physical energy, he was the proverbial BB ricocheting around the bathtub, seemingly able to be in many places at once with incredible speed. I have never known anyone who could successfully interact with the art world on so many different levels. Rick Brettell’s impact on and contributions to the art world will continue to be felt for a very long time.

JOHN HERNANDEZ

A Thank You to Rick Brettell

for his peripheral influence on my career and for initiating the opportunity to create an installation for the ‘Encounters 1’ series at the DMA in 1992 pairing me with Rainer Ganahl. It was an experience that I will always appreciate & remember as an important part of my growth as an artist.

TRACY HICKS

Tracy Hicks originally engaged with Rick Brettell in advocating for the establishment of the Texas Fund as a co-founder of D.A.R.E., which Rick put in place. Hicks was soon after included in the DMA’s ‘The State I’m In’ exhibition, 1991, curated by Annegreth Nill. He then benefited from Rick’s Hickory St. project with a solo show and work that would find its way back into the DMA paired with Damien Hirst in Nill’s ‘Encounters 5’ exhibition series that Rick had incentivized.

In Tracy Hick’s 2018 Retrospect exhibition, ‘Collect, Preserve, Change’ staged in UTD’s SP/IN Gallery, Rick, through EODIAH, generously funded the catalogue production and printing for this extensive exhibition following Hicks’s passing. Tracy often referred to Rick ‘as a breath of fresh vision’ and ‘the anchor hope for Dallas artist’ and Rick thought of him as an archivist artist anthropologist who gave new meaning to our resurrected history.

TRACY HICKS

Tracy Hicks, Fountain, 1992
Wood, cast bronze, and cast iron, 9” x 15” x 6”
Courtesy of Tracy Hicks Estate

ENCOUNTERS 1
Encounters 1, Feb 23 – April 19, 1992
Curator Annegreth Nill, Dallas Museum of Art
Courtesy Dallas Museum of Art and John Hernandez

John Hernandez, Breakfast Special, 1987
Part 1, Acrylic on wood, 29” x 20” x 10”
Part 2, Acrylic on wood, 13” x 9” x 4”
Courtesy of the Collection of Murray Camp, Dallas and John Hernandez

John Hernandez, Breakfast Special, 1987
Part 1, Acrylic on wood, 29” x 20” x 10”
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TRACY HICKS

Tracy Hicks originally engaged with Rick Brettell in advocating for the establishment of the Texas Fund as a co-founder of D.A.R.E., which Rick put in place. Hicks was soon after included in the DMA’s ‘The State I’m In’ exhibition, 1991, curated by Annegreth Nill. He then benefited from Rick’s Hickory St. project with a solo show and work that would find its way back into the DMA paired with Damien Hirst in Nill’s ‘Encounters 5’ exhibition series that Rick had incentivized.

In Tracy Hick’s 2018 Retrospect exhibition, ‘Collect, Preserve, Change’ staged in UTD’s SP/IN Gallery, Rick, through EODIAH, generously funded the catalogue production and printing for this extensive exhibition following Hicks’s passing. Tracy often referred to Rick ‘as a breath of fresh vision’ and ‘the anchor hope for Dallas artist’ and Rick thought of him as an archivist artist anthropologist who gave new meaning to our resurrected history.

TRACY HICKS

Tracy Hicks, Fountain, 1992
Wood, cast bronze, and cast iron, 9” x 15” x 6”
Courtesy of Tracy Hicks Estate

ENCOUNTERS 1
Encounters 1, Feb 23 – April 19, 1992
Curator Annegreth Nill, Dallas Museum of Art
Courtesy Dallas Museum of Art and John Hernandez

John Hernandez, Breakfast Special, 1987
Part 1, Acrylic on wood, 29” x 20” x 10”
Part 2, Acrylic on wood, 13” x 9” x 4”
Courtesy of the Collection of Murray Camp, Dallas and John Hernandez

John Hernandez, Breakfast Special, 1987
Part 1, Acrylic on wood, 29” x 20” x 10”
Part 2, Acrylic on wood, 13” x 9” x 4”
Courtesy of the Collection of Murray Camp, Dallas and John Hernandez
Twenty-seven years this summer, I distinctly remember standing in the not-yet-opened Hamon wing of the DMA off to the side of The Icebergs, and having a rather lively discussion with Rick about the early 20th-century group of Russian composers called the Moguchaya kuchka, also referred to as “The Mighty Bunch” (or “…Five,” as they numbered such), and even sometimes as “The Mighty Handful.” I had no real idea what I was talking about (as a lowly preparator no less), but I loved Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and knew vaguely of Borodin, and nonetheless slowly pushed headlong into my first soft argument with the then-Director of the Dallas Museum of Art.

It was a pattern to be repeated and relished almost every time we met (except for a rare escalation once, after too much white wine during a luncheon), especially after a significant period had passed between conversations, feverishly catching up like schoolchildren after summer break.

When Greg Metz asked me to participate in Rick’s memorial exhibition in mid-July, I immediately fixated upon his deep love and appreciation—not to mention his deft playing—of classical piano. I don’t play, but can read music and know basic chords. I inquired about the possibility of procurement of such an instrument and Greg quickly sent me back verification of the use of Rick’s piano, exactly one year to the day of his passing. I hastily settled on a performance of Erik Satie’s Vexations, a work for piano only discovered among his papers after the composer’s passing in 1925. This musical riddle is thought to be written during the first half of 1893, when the French eccentric was known to be involved in a brief, but intense love affair with painter and artists’ model Suzanne Valadon; the composer’s only known romantic relationship.

Vexations is composed of eighteen notes initially presented by a bass theme with two subsequent harmonisations, each an inversion of the other and following the bass theme motif. In the “Author’s Note” at the top of composition, it states: “To play this motif 840 times in a row, it will be good to prepare beforehand, and in the greatest silence, by serious immobilities.” (Performances of Vexations in its entirety can clock in anywhere from 18 to 28 hours.)

Given the seemingly interminable duration dictated by the score and the directions for preparation and performance, I am faced with finding the right solution to honor both Rick and the work itself. I am a novice at best, with the quizzical enthusiasm of a devotee, staring down an endurance test to honor the memory and dedication of a man who cleared many hurdles of his own device (and quite a few on my behalf, surely others).

Not being one to favor the “expression” of the performer, Satie instead preferred the mental processes invoked by his direction and notation, ideally resulting in shared psychological states by both audience and pianist. As there is no resolution in the composition, no perceived evolution within and a melody almost impossible to recall, all one is left with is the memory of having witnessed something significant, cultivated by sheer determination and meaningful time shared together.
A tribute to dear friend who was one of a rare breed of men: a museum director who cared not only for the works created by the artist, but even more for the artist who created the work. He was a true intellect—I learned so much about the world of art from Rick. Rick wanted to bring the entire community, poor and rich, multicultural, back to the museum. The children were given a marvelous program creating their own work of art. I will also miss Rick’s daily walks in the community where we lived. He would bring his friends to the house to see my art collection and meet me. One visit was from the director of the Van Gogh Museum, whom I greeted in my bed clothes. Both Rick and Carol became like family members. A special piece of my work, Night Migration, was bought by Rick in celebration of their marriage. I was also honored to make another tribute piece to Rick: one of my Cigar Box Shrines. And Carol has an art piece in celebration of her Migration book recently published and on the market. I look forward to an exhibit of Rick’s collection of books and art. A library of his work will be available at the university.

Jean Lacy, Covid Be Damn, 2020
Wooden Cigar Box Shrine Series (Inside top), 9” x 7” x 2”
(Inside bottom), 9” x 7” x 2”
Courtesy of the Artist

Stephen Lapthisophon, Zones, 2015
Collage: latex, oil stick, pencil, and spray paint on canvas, 48” x 60”
Courtesy Collection of Gary Cunningham
Words cannot convey my debt to Rick Brettell. For nearly thirty years he was the unwavering champion of my work. Together with Rudy Weingartner, who was introduced to me by Rick in the late 1990s, they reinvigorated the Cornudas Mountain Foundation in an effort to support construction at my West Texas job site, The Hill. Now that Rick is gone, my life has entered a different and, I would say, a more quiet period, though the activity in my various workshops continues. Rick was luminous in so many ways—that goes without saying—but beyond sheer brilliance of perception and intellectual agility, Rick Brettell was even more exceptional as the most generous man I have ever known; that is, generous of spirit, generous of heart and generous of soul, and for this I ache in his passing.

To know Rick Brettell was to get on a wild ride of unexpected pleasures. Rick asked me to work on projects over 25 years that took us to destinations like a corporate boardroom in Chicago, a modernist landmark in the Netherlands, an insane-asylum-turned-run in Burgundy, and a three-decade art installation in the desert. He opened my ears and mind and shoveled in a personal art history education. When I said I hadn’t known that modern art began in 1851, he responded “Why would you not think that?” The many others who also won the gift of Rick’s friendship and mentoring also know the experience. This film (The Rick Brettell Experience, 37 minutes) brings together clips from over the years of conversations—and adventures—with the amazing, brilliant, one-and-only Rick Brettell.

JAMES MAGEE

Mixed Media Circa 2011
Mixed Media, 12” x 12” x 3”
Courtesy of the Caroline and Rick Brettell Collection

QUIN MATHEWS

Film stills of Rick discussing art
(middle) The Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History, filmed 2015 by Quin Mathews Films
(bottom) The Museum of Texas Art, filmed 2020 by Quin Mathews Films
This work reminds me of times with Rick, with the music of his laughter and the woven network of his many friendships.

An early memory of Rick is his engaging with my installation of La Pausita, in 1993, a satire on Wendy Reves’ La Pausa at the DMA. He came to the show at Artisana Gallery in Deep Ellum several times, and brought people with him.

He gave me so much encouragement at Edith Baker Gallery in 2003 at my solo exhibit, Game Show. I can remember exactly where we were standing in front of the large Death Spinner, now at the Jesuit Museum.

Recently, I’ve been so fortunate to be included in small dinner parties with his close friends who understood that his great wit and storytelling were gifts to share. And that, with his limited stamina, he needed to leave the party early.

We miss him.

In gratitude,
—Pamela Nelson
Richard Brettell was the founder and central pillar for the artists in UT Dallas’ residence program, CentralTrak. I was privileged to be part of that program from the beginning. Having a studio loft at CentralTrak where I could live, and work, was very important for me. This opportunity helped me tremendously in my journey as a professional artist and, to this day, I remain thankful to Rick. He was not only a professor, but a mentor who constantly guided me as an artist with his insightful approach and vision, rooted in his incredible knowledge of art. He was like an uncle to me, and I will always remember him with a smile on his face.

Rick Brettell was a remarkable art professional who sincerely loved art and artists. His support and appreciation of Dallas-based artists was genuine and extremely helpful to many because he had the ability to make things happen. In my case he was instrumental in getting me one of my early outdoor commissions. He will be missed by everyone who knew him.

Ruben Nieto, Daffy Duck, 2021, Oil on canvas, 75” × 50”
Courtesy of Cris Worley Fine Art

Tom Orr, Page, 2019
Lexan and printed plastic, 24” × 15” × 17”
Courtesy of the artist and Barry Whistler Gallery
When Rick Brettell arrived in Dallas in 1988 as the newly appointed director of the Dallas Museum of Art, he brought with him an infectious energy that affected everyone in his orbit. As he reached out to collectors and board members, he equally embraced the artists in Texas—the first director to do so at such a vast scale. He created the Texas Fund as a way to collect important artists in the region, and to place them alongside national and international artists in the collection. He believed, and often stated, that some artists working in Texas are “artists of international stature.”

It was under his direction that Annegreth Nill, the new contemporary curator, established a series entitled Encounters. Each Encounter exhibition coupled simultaneous shows of two artists’ work alongside each other: one national or international-level artist, and one artist from Texas. This brought a new excitement to the museum program, as well as to artists across the state. Rick’s energy again affected the art culture of Texas, expanding the audience at the DMA and championing artists that lived here.

In 2001, I had my first museum solo exhibition at the DMA under the leadership of a new director, Jack Lane, and his deputy director Bonnie Pitman. Jack continued Rick’s mission with regard to Texas art, and instructed the newly established curator, Suzanne Weaver, to reinstate the Concentration series of exhibitions in the museum’s program, which now showcased young emerging artists with solo exhibitions at a national level. Included among them were Texas artists, continuing the tradition that Rick had instigated several years earlier.

By 1996, Rick began teaching at The University of Texas at Dallas. From this position his energy expanded in the years that followed to establish UTD’s Artist Residency, CentraIrak, to be followed by The Wilcox Space, as well as becoming director of the newly established Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History. If this wasn’t enough to do, Rick added to his resume: art critic for the Dallas Morning News. The man never stopped!

One of the highlights of my career was in the spring of 2017, when Rick wrote an in-depth review of my latest exhibition at Barry Whistler Gallery as well as the newly acquired commissioned works for UT Southwestern’s newest hospital. In the article he stated, “We realize this artist we have known for years is a major artist—not a ‘Dallas’ or a ‘Texas’ artist, but an artist of international stature.” He went on to say that the new works at UT Southwestern, “are simply breathtaking.” Seeing these words in print still resonates with me. Rick’s tremendous support and ability to articulate his sense of the paintings continues to energize me as an artist. His creative talent, keen eye, and energy affected countless artists throughout his time in Texas.

JOHN POMARA

The Energizing Force of Rick Brettell

John Pomara, Sky Pilot, 2020
Oil enamel on aluminum, 71” x 46”
Courtesy of Barry Whistler Gallery and the Artist

SUSIE ROSEMARIN

Susie Rosemarin, Yellow Study No.1, 2002
Acrylic on canvas, 20” x 20”
Courtesy EODIAH Collection
It was 1995, and I had the good fortune of meeting McKinney Avenue director Victoria Corcoran, who after spending no more than fifteen minutes knocking around my chaotic duplex, offered me, much to her surprise and to mine, a solo exhibition. Risky move I imagine as this would be the MAC’s first solo exhibition and I was an underknown thirty year old a few years removed from a three year stint in New York. Visiting her during the run of the exhibition, she excitedly told me that Rick Brettell had seen the show and loved it. That was nice to hear of course, though I don’t remember knowing at the time who this Rick Brettell was.

Forward to 2018. I get the word that the DMA has officially acquired the suite of eight large scale painting from my 2016 exhibition DESKTOP at Conduit gallery. Two years in the making, Rick had masterminded the acquisition and was fully committed, as was Nancy Whitenack whose efforts, along with the hands of a few others, sealed the deal. Everyone was happy. Good things take time. Rick also believed this would perhaps jump-start more DMA acquisitions from local artists. Rick was always one step ahead. Over the years Rick had become a true supporter of my work and was extremely generous with his time and help. From a residency at UTD’s Southside on Lamar, numerous reviews, help behind the scenes, with acquisitions, etc… I will always be both honored and grateful to him. Dr. Richard Brettell, on paper, was a local treasure with major contributions to the Dallas art world and the international artworld at large. But Rick, the guy from the MAC way back in 1995 was the guy who over the years I got to know a little, and for me that little meant a lot.

As an aesthete it was as if Rick didn’t follow beauty, beauty followed him, and he felt the responsibility to work tirelessly to share without doubting it for a minute. He may have looked back, and who doesn’t, but he seemed to always look forward, juggling ideas and crossing paths and making waves, and writing histories, and adding hot sauce to a tomato salad vinaigrette.
Knowing Rick was one of the most important events that transformed my life as an artist. I remember when, the first time I took his class on Impressionism, I got to ask Rick whether we would study Cézanne. He answered that Cézanne was a Post-Impressionist artist, but he wouldn’t mind including him in the schedule for that class. His knowledge and expertise were extraordinary, but so was his generosity and openness of mind. I was his first student to graduate at the PhD level, which in those days was not common at UTD. He was always on my side, supporting my decision to pursue studies for the doctoral degree. When my scholarship expired, he invited me as the first-ever artist from UTD to join the Southside on Lamar Artist Residency Program, where I had the chance to meet Charlie Steel. I must say also that one of the best friends I have in life, Tirtha Prasad Mukhopadhyay, is an Indian scholar whom I met in Rick’s class, and today he is my colleague at the University of Guanajuato. I now live in the same town where I was born. A few weeks ago, I launched a small cultural space that could embrace an artist residency program. As soon as I came up with the idea, I wanted to write to Rick and tell him about it. He is not with us anymore, but I still remember some of his last words when I was invited for a dinner to honor him for his achievements in Dallas, and he said: “I’m very proud of you.” I will say that I’m even prouder that I knew Rick. The diptych painting titled Wound (1999) that you can see in the exhibition was the first artwork I produced in Rick’s class about gestural paintings.

Rick acquired this piece from Getting to Know You at the Reading Room. He installed it in what was then his new office space at the Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History. Reading is Conversation is a collection of varied engagements/exchanges with The Humanism of Existentialism by Jean-Paul Sartre. My margin notes and markings on each page of Sartre’s essay are traced and isolated as ink drawings on a fibrous Japanese paper that are individually arranged in an incomplete grid in their assigned order behind glass and hung adjacent to the final drawing protruding like a shelf from the wall. This missing piece, printed on vellum and sandwiched between two pieces of glass, compresses the content I underlined/reinforced in the essay into a purely visual form that frustrates any efforts to read it. Ultimately, the act of reading is made visual here, a representation of the conversation had.
Rick was a great lecturer and encyclopedic scholar, but the most important things he taught me was that the art world was a place where I could not only survive but thrive. He told stories full of juicy gossip that humanized and made less scary the powerful people who ran things at museums all over the world. He got us tours of homes of collectors that no other professor would have done. He validated my ambitions to work in the art world and make art as a career without sugarcoating anything.
The Bat

By day the bat is cousin to the mouse.
He likes the attic of an aging house.
His fingers make a hat about his head.
His pulse beat is so slow we think him dead.
He loops in crazy figures half the night
Among the trees that face the corner light.
But when he brushes up against a screen,
We are afraid of what our eyes have seen:
For something is amiss or out of place
When mice with wings can wear a human face.

- Theodore Roethke

'The Bat', a poem by one of Rick's favorite poets, Theodore Roethke, which he loved to recite to friends with that classic twinkle in his eye.
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Artist, Teacher, Studio & Gallery Owner
Oneonta, AL
www.themakersdowntown.com
www.chadwesleyairhart.com
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www.artic.edu/artists/33376/ivan-albright
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Southern Methodist University
Dallas, TX
people.smu.edu/cbrettel
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Photographer, Dallas, TX
www craigheadgreen.com/caryn-brown
www.carolynbrownphotographer.com
carynphoto@icloud.com
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Artist, Educator, Iowa City, IA
www.ronald-cohen-roeirocns.casa
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Photographer, Contributing Arts Editor at The Dallas Morning News
Dallas, TX
nancoutier@gmail.com
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Dallas, TX
www.cunninghamarchitects.com
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Artist, Dallas, TX
conduitgallery.com/artists/annabel-daou
@annabeldaou
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@grabrieldawe
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www.gabrieldawe.com
@grabrieldawe
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Artist, Writer, Museum Consultant
Dallas Museum of Art, Chief of Art; Deputy Director for Planning under Rick Brettell
Austin, TX
www.valleyhouse.com
@gingergaynor
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Department of Art and Art History, College of Fine Arts,
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stephenlaphamophon.com
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Editor, Athenaeum Review, The University of Texas at Dallas
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Professor Emerita, Department of Art, The University of Texas at Austin
Austin, TX
www.tart.com
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Artist, Studio Owner, Dallas, TX
www.lubinalex.com
@alexlubin
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Dallas Museum of Art, Deputy Director for Planning under Rick Brettell
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Artist, Dallas, TX
www.darylmcmillan.com
@darylmcmillan
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Artist, Dallas, TX
www.mycro.com
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Artist, Curator, Educator, The University of Texas at Austin
Austin, TX
www.isamu-noguchi.org
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Dallas Museum of Art, Deputy Director for Planning under Rick Brettell
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Artist, Dallas, TX
www.tucker-richard.com
@tuckerrichard
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Artist, Dallas, TX
www.lyleschoenfield.com
@lyleschoenfield
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Artist, Dallas, TX
www.lyleschoenfield.com
@lyleschoenfield
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Dallas, TX
www.dallasmuseumofart.org
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www.trashaunasmith.com
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Artist, Dallas, TX
www.sugarcaneartist.com
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www.davidenticher.com
@davidenticher
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Artist, Dallas, TX
www.jeremytobin.com
@jeremytobin
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www.roberttunick.com
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www.roberttunick.com
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Artist, Dallas, TX
www.anafrancescavasquez.com
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Artist, Dallas, TX
www.carlaveselka.com
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Artist, Dallas, TX
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www.whitneyart.com
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www.sarahyoonart.com
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www.barryzelazny.com
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www.evgenyzolotov.com
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www.michaelzweier.com
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www.michaelzweier.com
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Artist, El Paso, Texas
mageehill.com

Melina, Roger F.
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Dallas, TX

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Filmmaker and journalist
Quin Mathews Film
Dallas, TX
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Artist, Curator, Educator, Arts Administrator
Director Manager of South Dallas Cultural Center, 1996-2016; Erik Johnson’s Member at Large: Dallas Arts and Culture Commission
Dallas, TX
talleydunn.com/project/vicki-meek
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Artist, Associate Professor, Curator, Gallery Director, The University of Texas at Dallas
Dallas, TX
www.gregmetzstudioart.com
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Artist, Dallas, TX
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Nili, Arnonoth T
Independent Curator, Columbus, OH
Retired Chief Curator, Contemporary Art, The Dallas Museum of Art
art@troweway.com
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On Tan
Artist, Dallas, TX
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Distinguished Scholar in Residence, Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History
Director of Art-Brain Innovations, Center for Brain Health
The University of Texas at Dallas
Dallas, TX
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Professor of Visual Art, The University of Texas at Dallas
Artist, Dallas, TX
www.tanyehrengallery.com
@johnpomara
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Thompson, Reynolds
Artist, Architect, Designer, Writer, Professor
Salamanca, Mexico
www.arleytompsonau.org/mrcheon@salvadorinoal
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Thornton, Terri
Artist, Curator of Education the Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth, TX
@nottrots
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Tracy, Michael
Artist, San Ygnacio, TX
www.riverpierce.org
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Director, Southside on Lamar Artist Residency, The University of Texas at Dallas
Founder and Director, The Reading Room
Dallas, TX
thereadingroom-dallas.blogspot.com
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www.amrcllley.com/zeke-williams
@zakewilliams
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Artist, Professor, The University of Texas at Austin
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