

In the middle of a busy Denver building, standout art stays out of the way

“Tectonic Shift: Dynamics of Change” features large pieces with physical depth

By Ray Mark Rinaldi · March 29, 2017

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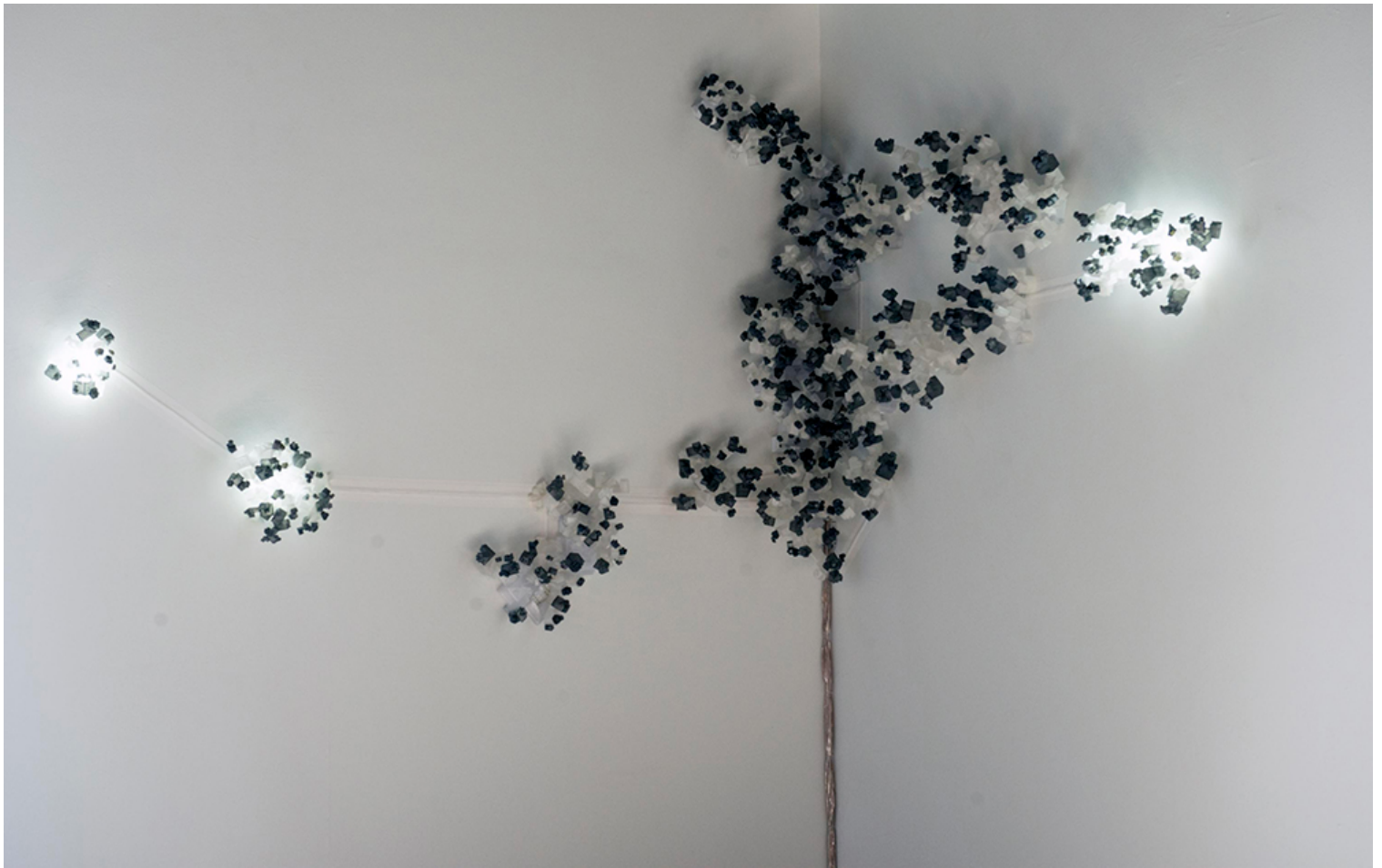
Angela Beloian's "Safety Net" is woven and crocheted from bed sheets donated by friends. (Bonny Lhotka, Provided by Walker Fine Art)

The McNichols Building is one of Denver's most prominent showplaces for visual art, but it's notoriously hard to stage an exhibit there. The place is vast — more than 30,000 square feet, mostly spread over a few cavernous conference rooms — and it takes a few truckloads of art to keep it from looking half-filled.

Plus, there are restrictions. The Civic Center icon has emerged as one of the most popular event spaces in town, and so the art has to stick closely to the walls, staying out of the way of the business meetings and wedding receptions that pack it on a regular basis. A lot of cocktails get served up at McNichols, and the art has to be ready for anything.

And yet, I've seen some terrific shows there as the city has painstakingly refurbished and reopened it to the public over the past few years. Curators have to push themselves, and their artists, to think big, and that has inspired some grand feats.

"Tectonic Shift: Dynamics of Change" is just the kind of effort that McNichols gives rise to. The third-floor exhibit is a showcase for the artists aligned with Walker Fine Art, one of the city's busiest commercial galleries. They are familiar names in the cultural scene, but the vast space offers a new way to see their work.



Laleh Mehran and Chris Coleman's "Transitional Domains." (Bonny Lhotka, Provided by Walker Fine Art)

Gallery owner Bobbi Walker asked her artists to create pieces with physical depth, so they engage the giant room and don't merely hang on its walls. But the pieces could only be so deep — maybe a foot — so they don't take up space that is filled with DJs and dancers when the place is used as a catering hall.

So, artists who usually work on flat surfaces (say, painters) were forced to add new dimensions to the work, while artists who usually work in 3-D (say, sculptors) had to think of compact ways to express their ideas.

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Angela Beloian, known to Walker regulars for her drawings on paper and panel, goes all the way with this concept. Working with the show’s theme of a society in flux, she created “Safety Net,” a sort of spider web, 9 feet in diameter, that is woven and crocheted from bed sheets donated by friends. Beloian wants us to think of refugees, forced from their homes with only a few precious personal belongings, and how their existing networks get integrated into the societies they migrate to.

Barbara Sorensen, familiar for her wiry sculptures made to be viewed from 360 degrees, sticks closer to the walls with “Pools,” attaching 32 basket-like objects to wooden panels. They are woven from rope, and hardened by resin, reflecting how fluid things change, and can grow stronger, as they move through new experiences.



In the giant McNichol’s Building, the bigger the art is, the better. Here are pieces by Sabine Aell (left) and Barbara Sorensen. (Bonny Lhotka, Provided by Walker Fine Art)

In both cases, you can see the signature moves of the artist — Beloian’s drawings often feature fine, intersecting lines, and Sorensen’s sculptures tend to employ wiry materials transformed into fixed objects — but here we get to know them in a new light.

“Tectonic Shift” has a number of standout works. Peter Illig incorporates neon lights into his painting “Shipwreck/Redemption,” an update of Théodore Géricault’s “The Raft of the Medusa.” The piece uses the shipwreck as a clever (and, I thought, worrying) metaphor for the country’s shifting economic classes.

Cheryl Rogers goes topical with “Pinned,” drawing what appears to be a vagina (yes, at McNichols) out of safety pins attached to an unstretched canvas. She hopes viewers will consider recent attacks on women’s rights.

Laleh Mehran and Chris Coleman, guest artists here and working as a duo, fill a corner with “Transitional Domains,” a construction of tiny, fabricated squares animated by electronic lights with shifting patterns, underscoring the mix of stability and unpredictably of contemporary existence.

In some ways, “Tectonic Shift” is all over the map. The artists all went their own way with the theme, and that can be jarring. At the same time, they bring their own creative modes to the table, and that fills it with personality.

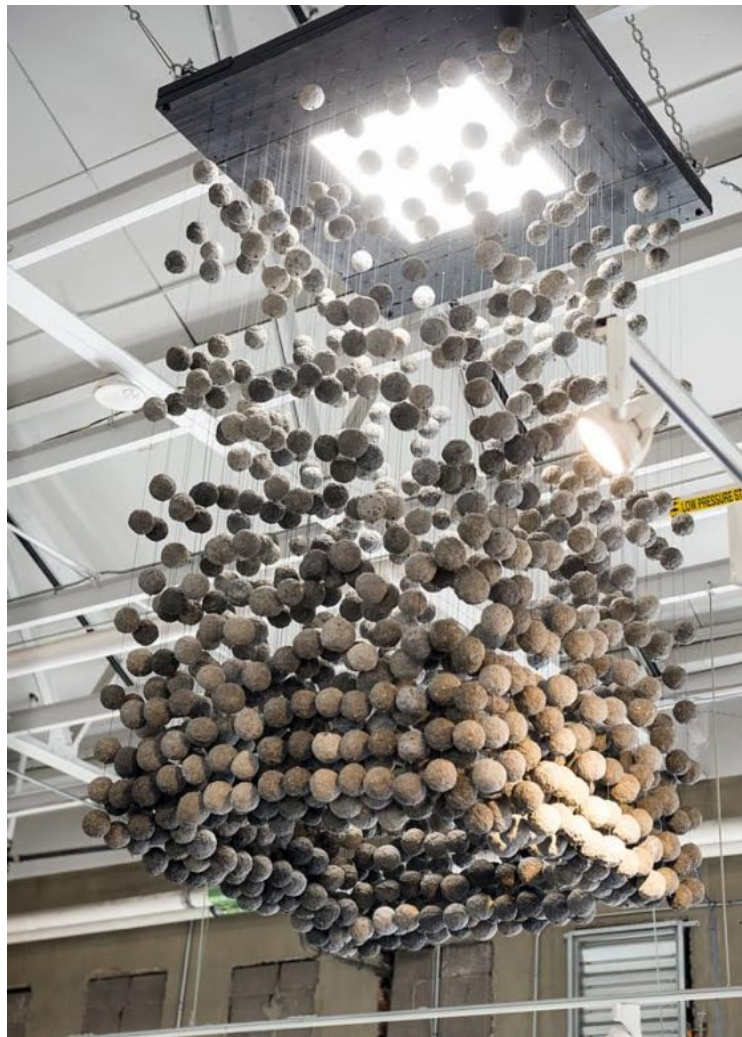
It’s also an accurate reflection of Walker Fine Art, which has outlasted other commercial galleries in town by offering a variety of wares that keep customers interested over the long haul. Walker artists don’t really have all that much in common except that Bobbi Walker likes them, and she has the sort of good taste people respect.

And, as a curator, she has stared down McNichols, which isn’t easy.

The exhibits at McNichols can be a benefit to everyone involved. They keep the party space interesting at a fraction of what it would cost for the city to purchase the high level of permanent art that would be needed to dress it up appropriately.

They also give a little boost to local artists and galleries. More work could actually sell out of there — artists need cash; keep that in mind — but exposure has value, too. The space may be a challenge to program, but it is busy. A lot of people see what goes on the walls.

“Tectonic Shift: Dynamics of Change” runs through April 30 at the McNichols Building in Denver’s Civic Center. Open 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays and by appointment. Free. 720-865-4200 or mcnicholsbuilding.com.



Tim Main’s “uS” hangs from the ceiling. It’s made from recycled waste paper, cement, sand and other materials. (Bonny Lhotka, Provided by Walker Fine Art)

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