

Ed Paschke Art Center a reflection of the artist



Illustration of the Ed Paschke Art Center in Chicago. (Courtesy the Ed Paschke Art Center)

By Claudine Ise, Special to the Tribune

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The painter Ed Paschke often said he wanted his vibrantly chromatic paintings to penetrate the nervous systems of the people who look at them. Viewers "either love it or hate it," he said of reactions to his surreal verging-on-psychedelic imagery, "but rarely are they indifferent to it."

Nicknamed Mr. Chicago because of his fondness for and devotion to the city, Paschke himself was by all accounts a universally loved figure here. He was among the most prominent of the Chicago Imagists, artists who pursued their commitment to figurative painting through individualistic blends of pop, surrealist and expressionist styles. Art aside, Paschke was known as a supremely kind and generous human being, especially when it came to supporting up-and-coming artists in the Chicago community.

Sunday, that community will come together to celebrate Paschke's life and work on what would have been his 75th birthday. The new Ed Paschke Art Center officially opens its doors to the public with Paschke in the Park, a free, family-oriented event at Jefferson Memorial Park, directly across the street from the center.

The event features food, music, face painting, temporary tattoos and performances by the Redmoon theater group involving a drum tower and a roving DJ on a bubble-shooting Segway. There will also be numerous Paschke-inspired art projects, such as a mural-size outline of a Paschke image like a giant coloring page and Paschke paintings that can be re-created with Legos. The resulting community-generated artworks will be exhibited in the center afterward.

Sunday's main attraction remains the work of Paschke himself. The center — which has 2,800 square feet of gallery space and 1,700 square feet of space for educational programming — will be open for tours and viewing from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sunday; regular daily hours will be the same. A career-spanning exhibition of Paschke's

oeuvre dating from 1969 to 2004 will remain on permanent view.

Taking a spin through the galleries, visitors will quickly realize they don't need a doctorate in art history to "get" a Paschke painting — all that's required is a working pair of eyes. His figures frequently sport overly large Mr. Potato Head-style noses and bodies that blur male and female physical characteristics. Their faces often appear masked or are completely covered in wild, tattoo-like patterns. They are not-quite-human creatures that confront you with their otherworldly allure, daring you to call them beautiful — and making it impossible not to.

The center was founded by the Ed Paschke Foundation, and is funded by The Rabb Family Foundation. The interim director is Vesna K. Stelcer, who with Lionel Rabb runs the Rabb foundation. The couple's abiding love for Paschke's art is the main reason they were eager to help make the art center possible. Additionally, the Rabb foundation's main focus is aiding underserved communities in Jefferson Park, the Polish immigrant community on the Northwest Side where Stelcer and Rabb make their home. It's also where Paschke, himself the son of Polish immigrants, lived for much of his life.

Via email, Paschke's daughter Sharon notes that even as his success grew, her father consciously chose to remain in Chicago rather than stake a claim on New York. His works have been featured at hallowed institutions like the Met and the Louvre, yet still, "he felt there was no need to leave Chicago; it was his home and he was proud of it." By staying, "he was able to give Chicago's art community the international attention it deserved."

Sharon Paschke and her brother Marc created the Ed Paschke Foundation shortly after their father's death in 2004. She notes that, while the foundation has worked on a number of projects over the years, they never had the space to exhibit their father's work in significant numbers. Not only does the center provide a permanent venue to do so, it will also educate the public about Paschke's creative process and provide a space for community art to flourish.

Stelcer — who says searches for a permanent director, development director and community engagement director are underway — explains, "We want (the art center) to be a direct reflection of Ed Paschke himself," with exhibition programming that is "broadly reflective" of Paschke's life, work and multifarious interests in fine art, fashion, media, music and other pop culture forms. Exhibitions will also highlight the creativity of other Chicago artists, "especially artists that don't have much opportunity to show their work."

From Aug. 11 to Jan. 2, the center will exhibit Steve Schapiro's photographs of Andy Warhol, Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground — Paschke was a fan of them all. Slated for 2015 are Paul Natkin's photographs of Buddy Guy, the Rolling Stones and other music icons. The center is also partnering with Luminarts, a cultural foundation that supports emerging Chicago artists, to create an artist-in-residence program at the center, set to launch later in the fall.

The center also contains a partial re-creation of Paschke's studio based on a photograph Marc Paschke took shortly after his father passed away.

"Everything was still there — ephemera, books," Stelcer recalls. "He had a painting that we call 'the unfinished boxer,' which shows his process, how he (started with) black and white and then added the color." That same unfinished painting can be seen inside the studio re-creation, along with a door and window from Paschke's original space.

If he were here today, Sharon Paschke believes, her father "would have been blown away" by the community art center that now bears his name.

"Dad loved to create and teach, and the center is a means to both those ends." She adds that Paschke believed "art should be accessible to everybody, not just art aficionados."

Stelcer says the Ed Paschke Art Center will be guided by that same ethos.

"We want it to be a learning place, a living, breathing space where anyone can walk in and not feel intimidated."

Paschke in the Park, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday, Jefferson Memorial Park. Free. 5415 W. Higgins Ave, open daily 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., starting Sunday. 312-533-4911 or edpaschke.org.

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