



**District of Columbia
Arts Center**

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DCAC Archive : Director's Letters March : April 2012

In 1989, George Hemphill (of Hemphill Fine Arts and a DCAC founder) was quoted in the Washington City Paper as saying that if he had his druthers DCAC would be about pushing boundaries. It would seem that Mr. Hemphill has gotten his wish, if the results of the DCAC Decathlon are to be submitted as evidence.

What our Visual Arts Committee originally conceived as an opportunity for artists to approach a variety of mediums truly turned out to be a cohesive and dynamic exhibition of four artists who pushed their creative boundaries to the extreme. What's more, it pushed the viewer's boundaries of what artists do and how their concepts manifest in concrete forms. We often say that we want to our art to challenge the audience and in this case, it went even further than challenging them; we asked them to consider all four artists and vote for the one they thought excelled in all ten disciplines required by the competition.

In case you are not on top of just what I am talking about, the DCAC Decathlon was a friendly competition between four artists who were required to create work in ten specific media: Textiles/fiber art, Painting, Drawing, Video, Printmaking, Photography, Collage, Sound, Conceptual Art, and Sculpture. Each artist had the exact same dimensions of space in the gallery in which to present their works. A panel of judges ranked them in each category, and we awarded medals to the winners in the same fashion as athletes in an Olympic decathlon. We also had an additional award for the "Fan Favorite" which was the result of our patron's individual votes. We had well over 250 votes and most people seemed to take their voting seriously. We would see people come into the gallery, get their ballot, and carefully walk around the exhibition, studying the work from multiple perspectives. They discussed the individual pieces among themselves and found themselves in conversation with strangers about very specific aspects of the art. It was the kind of interaction with art that every gallerist hopes to see. (Well, a non-profit gallerist.)

DCAC is all about trying to engage the artist and the art. It delights me and everyone associated with the place when it happens. When we can actually hear the change in the conversation from "I don't know anything about art, but I know what I like," to "I'm not really sure if this is art and I'm not sure if I'm supposed to like it." (An actual quote.) The act of considering art can open so many possibilities. I've always thought that if you will allow yourself to be vulnerable enough to really let the art permeate your thoughts then the whole process will be repeated in other contexts. And a world where more people are open to unexpected possibilities is one in which I would very much like to live. I don't know about others, but that's why I create the work

I do. I don't think that art can save the world, but I do think it can open our eyes to the fact that it is at risk.

So I applaud the artists who took part in this exhibition; I think it took a lot of courage, confidence and trust in their own vision to participate in such an undertaking. And I also applaud the patrons who opened themselves up to the experience and helped us choose the "winner." The Washington Post said it quite well when they wrote about the Decathlon: "When a show provides both engaging work and food for thought, everyone's a winner." I couldn't agree more.

B Stanley,
Executive Director