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Artists' Artbite grabs bone

By Kevin Lynch
The Capital Times

Through the large commissions it charges, a conventional art gallery can take too much of a bite out of an artist.

Artbite is ready to bite back, or at least grab more of the bone.

But look who's throwing the bone. The Artbite artists collective has collaborated with a corporation — for gallery space, rather than funding. This altruistic artists' concept has set up shop in a bastion of capitalism.

The results are felicitous and colorfully diverse. Good art, on the artists' terms.

The exhibit "Artbite/Mega Bite" is showing at the Promega Corp., 5445 Cheryl Parkway in Fitchburg, through Oct. 30. The biopharmaceutical technology innovator has become the most proactive corporation in the Madison area for supporting artists through regular exhibitions. (Show hours are 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday-Friday, or by appointment. Call 277-2669.)

Artbite doesn't admit the aggressive self-interest implicit in its name. But they're close to the idea of a collective for its own sake, rather than just sharing an implicit artistic or political agenda, like many former Madison art groups or such current entities as the Union Transfer Artists and the Commonwealth Gallery.

Artbite was formed about six years ago. The members had seemingly little more in common than talent and a desire to exhibit. They were friends who first "exhibited" in one of their apartments.

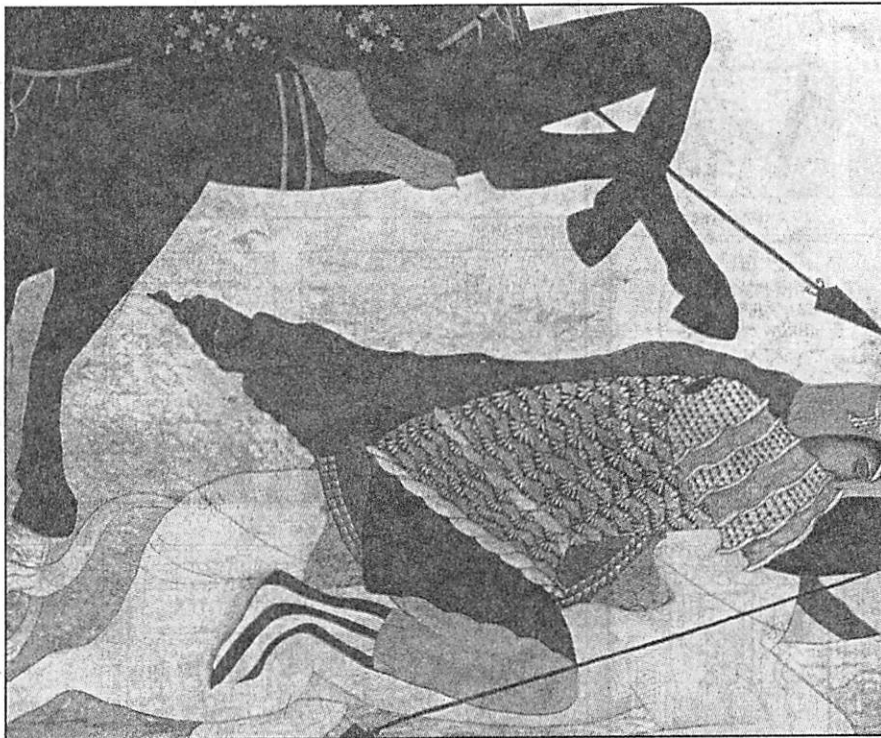
Since then, the group has shown in the Madison area frequently. They were pursuing large-city markets when Promega curator Daniel Swadener contacted them.

He was impressed by the professionalism of Artbite's group portfolio.

In turn, the artists bit on Promega's high-tech, architecturally snazzy space.

"We've really tried to look for unique spaces and venues," says Artbite co-founder Andy Mayhall. "Sometimes when you're at the mercy of a gallery, you feel you don't have many choices. We did a show at a church in Lake Mills, one at Eccentric Gallery, which is an offbeat venue in Milwaukee, and another at a Rockford space, which was also artists' studios."

It's debatable whether all of these artists are quite ready for Chicago or New York.



Artbite member Theresa Abel's gold-leaf painting "The Horsemen" applies a religious fresco style to a dramatic military-style scene.

Short of that, Swadener feels this is a good way for a collective to take an enterprising step. The widely traveled art consultant has explored gallery scenes around North America and Europe in the last few years. He says collectives are happening more in advanced art scenes. He noted on a recent trip to Winnipeg, Canada, the city was strewn with art collective exhibitions, but very few conventional commercial galleries.

"And Madison is more of a crafts-oriented market," Swadener asserts. "In Madison, unless it's craft, or under \$1,000, or perfectly suited to one's decor, it's hard to sell art here."

So new solutions are in order, like forging markets outside of commercial galleries, with their established business policies and clientele.

Mayhall says that Promega will take 20 to 30 percent of their artwork sales, compared to a typical local gallery, which takes 40 to 50 percent.

"Artbite has tried to maintain some control over its exhibits and how it's presented," he says. "That's important to all of us. Plus, as a group, we push each other to do things in ways that we might not otherwise do."



Andy Mayhall's oil painting "Searching for an Egg" illustrates the painter's blend of absurd wit and magical atmosphere.

Given these artists' individualism, no discernible themes arise in this show.

There are a few points of affinity among several artists. One painter, Theresa Abel, does largely religious subject matter,

while photographer Dede Bangs shoots atmospheric shots of marble religious figures.

But Abel's best painting is about style, courage and thundering hooves. "The Horsemen" is a stunning close-up view, painted in gold leaf, in a religious fresco style. Perhaps this depicts crusaders, but the drama is purely human.

One gorgeously garbed rider hunkers down close to his horse so as to avoid the spear of the other rider.

By contrast, Abel's other large portraits of holy people are somber and morose, even with their aspects of collage.

Bangs' statue photos are moody and atmospheric, but as a whole seem somewhat precious, except for one witty hand-colored shot, "Big Toe," which focuses on a figure's bare foot peeking from beneath flowing robes.

Debra Gottschalk's slick oil painting veers toward commercial illustration technique. But she simplifies human features and imaginatively transports her subjects. "Almost Full" depicts a woman pouring a plant-watering can into the edge of a lake.

The notion of filling a lake this

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way is fetching, and the woman's features, baby-faced and slit-eyed, are faintly haunting.

Andy Mayhall uses a less accomplished painting technique, but he buoys his absurd wit with a sense of the magical.

His series of paintings features a shadowy human figure who wears a chicken on his head. The man is striving to reach one of two floating objects, an egg and a ring. The ring may signify a man's longing for human conception. Or is he controlled by the chicken's desires? Or is he just a bird brain?

It's a fun little quandary, and Mayhall's appealing sequence of images urges you to stand there to see what might happen, a la "Waiting for Godot."

Kelli Hoppmann uses literary and biblical allusions in her paintings. Some are done on full-size, free-standing room dividers, such as "Delilah," but these tend to overplay their dramatic depictions.

More effective is the less ambitious "Yeats," which portrays the great poet in his youth, intensely somber, and surrounded by a passage from one of his most beloved verses: "Tread softly because you tread on my dreams."

Tim O'Neill's sculptures and furniture display rich wood, pristine technique and some traces of odd wit.

Robert Carpenter's box constructions, containing objects ranging from old photograph portraits to bones and twigs, update Joseph Cornell. These are well-crafted and intriguing works.