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Q&A with managers of Curious Matter, a Downtown Jersey City art gallery readying 'The Ecstatic'

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By **Brendan Carroll/For The Jersey Journal**

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Courtesy of Curious Matter

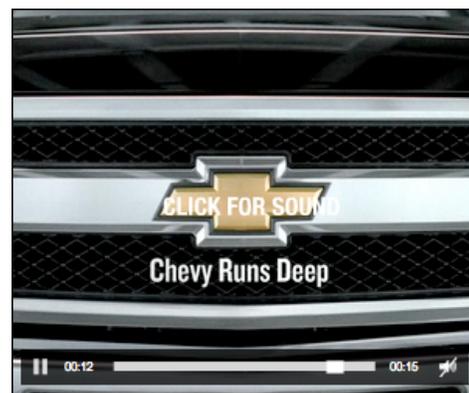
Raymond E. Mingst of Curious Matter talks about running a gallery and life in Downtown Jersey City with Brendan Carroll for an interview in today's Jersey Journal.

Editor's note: This is the **second in an occasional series** of interviews by Brendan Carroll with people in Jersey City's well-respected art scene.

Curious Matter is a visual art gallery managed by Raymond E. Mingst and Arthur Bruso in Downtown Jersey City that features an array of eclectic objects and curiosities from emerging to mid-career artists.

The gallery is hosting an opening reception for the new exhibition, "The Ecstatic," from 3 to 6 p.m. this Sunday. All are welcome. The show, which continues through June 13, features artists who explore the theme of ecstasy in their work.

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Hold onto your hats - Merriam-Webster defines "ecstasy" as a state of being beyond reason and self-control; a state of overwhelming emotion; and a mystic or prophetic trance.

Raymond + Arthur, tell me a little bit about yourselves.

ARTHUR: I was born in Albany, New York. I received my MFA from the University of Pennsylvania. After graduating, I moved to New York to set up my studio. I also became exhibitions director for a non-profit arts organization where I began curating shows at venues throughout the city.

RAYMOND: I met Arthur when he was curating at La Mamma Gallery. We were both living in the East Village and I was working on a particular installation project that evolved into the Cabinet Gallery that was essentially an earlier incarnation of Curious Matter.

You two run a gallery in Jersey City. How did you get started, and why here?

ARTHUR: My first experience with curating and exhibiting art was working at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. I gained a lot of insight into the process and when I moved to New York I applied that to the work I did as an Exhibitions Director. When I met Raymond he was exploring ideas about what an exhibition space could be through his work-creating temporal artworks in desolate places as well as exploring traditional museum-like installations. We had compatible ideas and goals and Raymond's attitude was always, "OK, let's do it."

RAYMOND: The motivation to move here was for more studio space but we took with us a vision for a contemporary art venue that followed the tradition of cabinets of curiosities-making the connection between the work and a process of inquiry.

Arthur, can you please provide an example of what temporal artwork is, and how it differs from traditional museum installations?

ARTHUR: Raymond had been creating artworks in forests, on beaches and other remote sites. He used snow, sand, essentially whatever was on hand. They were meant to exist for a short while, then disappear back to the earth. He had chosen not to record these works, however, I became involved in photographing a few of them.

RAYMOND: On the flip side of these impermanent works I started to think more about the stewardship of objects and art, presentation and collections.

What are the challenges to keeping a gallery open here?

ARTHUR: As long as the passion for art is there and the desire to make it available to the public exists, you just figure out what it takes and do it.

What is your business plan like?

ARTHUR: Not to romanticize it, but I don't view it as a business. It is part of my creative life.

RAYMOND: For both of us, our artwork and exploring ideas and approaches to exhibiting the work have always been linked.

OK. Let me put it another way. What are the sources of revenue that allow you to sustain a commercial gallery in Jersey City? I ask this question because many commercial galleries in Jersey City have come and gone in the past ten years. Curious Matter is still



Courtesy of Curious Matter

Arthur Brusco runs Curious Matter in Jersey City with Raymond E. Mingst. The gallery is hosting a monthlong group exhibit, "The Ecstatic," opening Sunday.

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standing, on top the mountain. Why do you think this is the case?

ARTHUR: We've been flexible and have always done whatever was necessary to present our exhibitions. Curious Matter recently became a non-profit, that allows us to fund raise and accept donations. Please see our website: www.curiousmatter.blogspot.com for more on that.

RAYMOND: Commercial and not-for-profit; private and public -- these are distinctions, but they ebb and flow. At the heart, we present our exhibitions as a gift. We show the work because it engages and excites us, sometimes the artwork blows the top of our heads off. We're compelled to share it and we're thrilled other artist's want to take part. The manner in which anyone is moved to reciprocate can take many forms -- a contribution; collecting the work of a particular artist; sharing thoughts about an exhibit or letting us know the work we do is appreciated -- that's currency we value highly.

How is the art business different from other businesses? Or maybe it's not?

RAYMOND: The people are smarter and better looking.

What does it take to get an exhibition off the ground, from conception to development to execution?

RAYMOND: Caffeine.

ARTHUR: The exhibition ideas come from our explorations as artists. After deciding on the concept, we then reach out to other artists and put together a collection of work. An important aspect of each show is writing about it-how the theme connects to the work, historical context.

RAYMOND: Then there's the nuts and bolts, shipping/receiving, hanging, signage, the catalog, promotion.

Caffeine is a wonder. I recommend Las America's on Grove Street -- specifically the espresso with milk. As far as writing is concerned, I write while I work, too -- for me, writing helps me to clear my head. Who writes the catalog and the press materials?

RAYMOND: One or the other of us might take the lead on a particular project, but essentially it's collaborative.

How do you select the artists in your exhibition or should artists approach your gallery to get a show?

RAYMOND: Artists who visit the gallery ask about showing with us all the time. They resonate to our exhibitions and point of view because we let the work speak, we don't subordinate it to a curatorial conceit. Our themes are a departure point for the artists, and the theme helps the audience make a connection to the work. We open up a dialogue; we don't shut it down.

ARTHUR: And, we're open to artists at all career stages, from new or so-called emerging artists to established veterans of the art world.

Do you respond to unsolicited submissions? Also -- what should an artist include in a submission -- letter, work sample, resume?

ARTHUR: Curious Matter is always interested in looking at art. Sending an e-mail query is the most efficient way to contact us -- curiousmatter@comcast.net. But artists should do some research, get to know what the gallery is about and, ideally, have already visited. A cold e-mail with just a web link will get as much attention as the effort put in to send it.

What's your favorite part of the gallery?

ARTHUR: Singling out a favorite part would be difficult because I enjoy the process, but if pressed, I would say the art. And choosing flowers for the mantel.

RAYMOND: The extended period of time I get to spend with the art. Being around the work day after day informs my appreciation-the sense of discovery is continually renewed.

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And what's your least favorite part?

ARTHUR: Cleaning up after the opening.

RAYMOND: Not being able to keep everything for myself! I've come to understand the pleasures of being a collector. Every show has a few pieces that I become particularly obsessed with and sometimes they end up in my own collection.

If someone you cared for were beginning a career as a gallerist, what three pieces of advice would you give them?

RAYMOND: I don't think of myself as a gallerist per se, but as I understand the job, you need to learn about art, make connections and get a good wardrobe--although, maybe not in that order.

ARTHUR: Decent wine, hot hors d'oeuvres, hire a server.

Do you have any goals for the gallery right now?

ARTHUR: Curious Matter is planning on creating 2 and 3 person shows as part of its program.

RAYMOND: Also hosting speakers on the themes we explore visually.

Do you have any plans of hosting off-site temporary installations in the city?

RAYMOND: Brendan, I believe you've been involved in a number of works that have seized available public space -- Jersey City Sunshine, a piece created with Turmeric, the Peep Parade. I've seen photos of these works and think they're absolutely beautiful. I've always got the idea of temporal works scratching at the back of my mind, but we're interested in what you're up to next.

Artists have been stereotyped as being temperamental or difficult. (Caravaggio murdered someone over a game of tennis; Paul Gauguin left his wife and children to marry a 13-year-old Polynesian girl; Jackson Pollock allegedly urinated in Peggy Guggenheim's fireplace.) Are artists difficult to deal with? Have you ever had artists who have made unreasonable demands on you?

RAYMOND: Sorry, Brendan, your examples reveal the inherent problems with tennis, marriage and bladder control, not artists. All the artists we work with are wonderful in every way.

ARTHUR: I treasure all of the time I spend with the artists. Some artists are shy of the openings, almost reclusive, but it's a great time to meet their audience and each other.

What is next for Curious Matter?

ARTHUR: "The Ecstatic" is our next group show. It opens May 16, 2010

RAYMOND: That's a Sunday, the reception is 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. Everyone should come.

Last question. Who serves your favorite cup of coffee in the city?

RAYMOND: The fine folks at Marco and Pepe.

ARTHUR: Um, I thought you liked Maggie's coffee?

RAYMOND: Right! And, the fine folks at Skinner's Loft.

ARTHUR: You have to choose.

RAYMOND: No I don't. I like a lot of coffee.

If you go:

"The Ecstatic," a group exhibit, runs Sunday through June 13 at Curious Matter, 272 Fifth St., Jersey City. An opening reception is scheduled for 3-6 p.m. Sunday. Go to curiousmatter.blogspot.com for details.