

Plaza Art Fair

More than half a century of tradition

The Plaza Art Fair is expected to attract more than 250,000 visitors this weekend — if the weather is nice. The clay cup at top right is one of Lynn Smiser Bowers' works. Out-of-state works include paintings from Californian Jie Zhou, below right, and pastels by Diane French Gaugush from Wisconsin, at far right.

Plaza Merchants Association



Plaza Art Fair has a growing reputation as one of the best in U.S.

By ELIZABETH G. HOWARD
Special to The Star

An estimated 250,000 people may mill the streets of the Country Club Plaza during this weekend's Plaza Art Fair. Most are there to browse, some to buy, all to enjoy the sights and sounds and smells of the cultural extravaganza.

For 206 of them, however, this weekend is a way to earn their bread and butter and the opportunity to win recognition from their peers. For them, it's three long days in the elements, trying to make a living in this unpredictable career they have chosen — creating and selling art.

Lyn Smiser Bowers is a potter who has lived in Kansas City since she came here to attend the Kansas City Art Institute in 1972. She has been selling her works at the Art Fair off and on for 26 years. Bowers says it is an erratic and unusual way to earn a living.

"You're self-employed, and there are times when things are uneven," she says. "I'll sometimes have three or four months between shows. You have to be prepared to have a financial lapse."

Bowers is one of 23 participants from the metropolitan area. All artists pay a \$20 jury fee to be considered, and \$300 more if they are accepted. For the 183 other artists rolling in from 39 states, overhead is much higher for the three-day excursion.

Steven Hill of Kansas City can sympathize with the out-of-towners.

He has shown his pottery at the Plaza fair for most of the last 20 years, but he also travels to other cities for other shows. His wife, Susan Hill, also will show her fiber works at the art fair. Both travel to eight to 10 shows a year.

"If I'm going to do a show locally, I don't have the requirement (to make money)," Steven Hill says. "If I go to Miami, though, I have to make it worthwhile."

"When you have a weekend show, it ends up taking a week of time. You have to prepare early. It usually involves a drive and motel rooms and meals out of town. People coming from far away have to better justify (the investment)."

One way the Plaza Merchants Association encourages artists to come back is by selecting different ones to do the peer jurying.

The artists join a panel of critics and curators to pick each year's participants from more than 1,000 anonymous slides.

During the fair, peer judges help decide how the \$10,000 prize money will be distributed. The prizes are awarded to the top artists in categories including painting, graphics, photography, sculpture, clay, fiber, metal, jewelry, glass, wood and basketry.

One juror this year is Peggy Brown, a watercolor painter from rural southern Indiana. She started coming to the Plaza Art Fair in 1973 and has missed only a few. Her husband, Jim, who specializes in black-and-white photography, also has attended for the last 10 years.

A former award winner herself, Brown made a trip to Kansas City in June to wade through all the entries.



"I took it as an honor to be asked," she says. "Very few shows have exhibiting artists as part of the jury. That is something that the Plaza does that most (other art fairs) should do."

"We kind of know what to expect. We know that when you see the slides, some can be deceiving. If you are involved in it, you may know that this person's work is good and it's just the slides that aren't good, and vice versa."

Gayle Terry, promotions director for the Plaza Merchants Association, says the peer jury process is a key factor in the success and individuality of the Plaza Art Fair.

"It is good for the judges because they are looking at other's works. It forces them to get out and see what is going on in their art world."

The peer jury also selects the top 25 percent artists and offers them an invitation to return the following year, without having to go through the original slide jury. Terry says this is one other way to "reward artists who do a strong presentation."

"It keeps them coming back," she



says. And they do come back. The Plaza Art Fair has consistently been top-ranked in the industry as one of the best events for artists. These rankings are based on several factors, Terry says, including how artists are treated, the ease of set-up, expected sales and fee levels. On that scale the show has become comparable to events such as the Cherry Creek Art Fest in Denver and the Coconut Grove Fest in Miami.

But it's not just the sales and set-up that has brought artists back for 65 years running.

"The Plaza (Art Fair) is great, because it comes on the edge of fall when the air gets cool and crispy. It's usually a really nice weekend," Bowers says. "And each year (the event coordinators) have really tried to improve it. They really make sure the quality of the artists is good and they try to accommodate (the needs of) the artist."

"It is a labor of love. You really have to love doing this and have a big commitment to it."

Day by day

The 65th Annual Plaza Art Fair runs from 5 to 10 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Saturday and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. It's free.

Live music from jazz and blues to reggae and rock will play throughout the weekend at the Main Stage at Pennsylvania Avenue and Nichols Road. The schedule:

■ Today

5-6:30 p.m.: Stan Kessler & the Sons of Brazil
6:45-8:15 p.m.: Max Groove
8:30-10 p.m.: Simplicity

■ Saturday

10-11:30 a.m.: Joe Cartwright
11:45 a.m.-1:15 p.m.: The Pastels
1:30-3 p.m.: Nace Brothers
3:15-4:45 p.m.: Neon Blue
5-6:30 p.m.: BCR
6:45-8:15 p.m.: Pat Morrissey Trio
8:30-10 p.m.: Green Card

■ Sunday

11 a.m.-12:15 p.m.: Michael O'Shiver/Bill Crane
12:30-1:45 p.m.: SDI
2-3:15 p.m.: Sam Johnson Band
3:30-5 p.m.: David Basse & the City Light Orchestra

Also, Classical Corner, at Central and Nichols, will feature symphony, classical and guitar music. That schedule:

■ Today

5-7 p.m.: New Ear
7-10 p.m.: Festival Brass Quintet

■ Saturday

10 a.m.-Noon: Members of the Kansas City Symphony
Noon-4 p.m.: Kansas City Guitar Society
4-6 p.m.: Lyra Chapter of the American Harp Society
6-8 p.m.: Members of the Kansas City Symphony
8-10 p.m.: Festival Brass Quintet

■ Sunday

11 a.m.-1 p.m.: Kansas City Guitar Society
1-5 p.m.: Lyra Chapter of the American Harp Society

Kids can keep busy at the Mattie Rhodes Kids' Art Workshop near 48th and Pennsylvania. There will be art projects for children ages 4 to 12, and the F.A.O. Schwartz Toy Soldier will help introduce the latest toys. There is no admission.

Twenty Plaza restaurants will offer their culinary specialties at stands with everything from hummus and egg rolls to knockwurst and Haagen-Dazs. Call 753-0100 for more information.