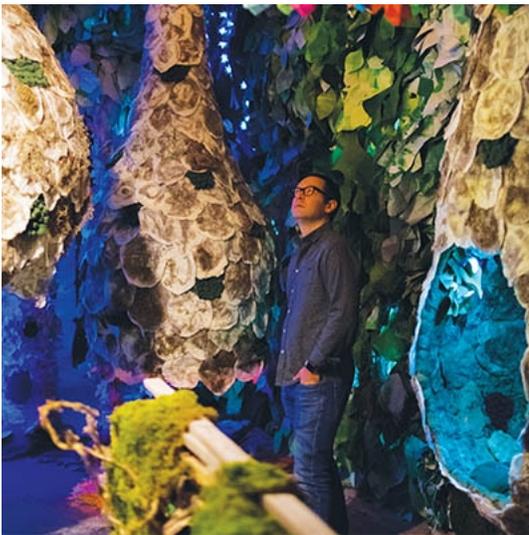


Factory direct

Ninety minutes from Tulsa, SHIFT is Oklahoma’s foray into large-scale experiential art

BY MEGAN ROSSMAN

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In a world where digital technology increasingly takes the place of everyday tactile experiences, the last few years have seen a corresponding rise in the popularity of immersive art experiences. Artists like Yayoi Kusama, whose infinity mirror rooms currently appear as part of sold-out exhibits across North America, and destinations like Meow Wolf in Santa Fe and City Museum in St. Louis lift audiences from the roles of observers to those of participants. In these places, art isn’t a static image—it’s an environment to explore and absorb.

Taking inspiration from these innovators, a team of Oklahoma City community leaders and artists formed a collective known as Factory Obscura earlier this year, and—with the help of numerous volunteers—spent three months planning and another three months constructing SHIFT, which they describe as a “fully-immersive, experiential art installation.”

“To people who haven’t seen SHIFT, it’s difficult to explain what we’re trying to make,” said Kelsey Karper, exhibit curator and co-founder of both Current Studio and Factory Obscura. “It’s a little like an amusement park or theater. It’s a cross between a lot of things. It’s high-energy up front, and the farther you go back, the more relaxing it gets.”

SHIFT at Current Studio in Oklahoma City

BRANDON SEEKINS

The installation is a cerebral funhouse where the underlying theme of human consciousness takes physical form as visitors explore roughly 1,200 square feet of intertwining environments representing the mind, the man-made world, and the natural world.

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“How we interact with those environments is how we explore our own consciousness,” Karper said.

Visitors enter the space through a web resembling a floor-to-ceiling skull made of welded pencil rod steel and blinking neurons. From there, they can climb through an enormous clock face into a life-size optical illusion, toward a whirling, hypnotic spiral. Or they can crawl through a blacklight-illuminated tunnel, which looks like the setting of a prehistoric rave. Tulsa native and pattern designer Tiffany McKnight painted the 1,000 inches of glowing canvas.

On the other side of the studio, guests pass through a small black chamber filled with outer space-related videos and a touch-activated blinking staircase that ascends to a celestial bank of color-changing clouds composed of hundreds of plastic milk jugs threaded together.

Even using the bathroom at SHIFT is an adventure. Mirrored walls, sea plants cascading from the ceiling, and diffused, reflective light turn a visit to the toilet into an undersea escapade.

Beyond the bathroom, the nature theme continues as the exhibit veers into its final motif. A canopy of trees, walls of felt and papier-mâché leaves, and ceilings of origami blossoms swaddle a trio of hanging “pods” and a grassy “nest” area. These cushy rest spots, paired with handmade flora and fauna and a soundtrack of chirping birds, encourage visitors to linger.

“It’s a comforting space,” said Leigh Martin, Factory Obscura artist and Tulsa native. “And there are many details to observe. It incites a sense of wonder.”

Martin, who works primarily as a fiber artist, focused on creating the pods. There’s a pod reminiscent of a beehive, an ocean-themed pod, and a forest pod—blanketed inside with LED-lit flowers and leaves—that’s large enough to accommodate an adult for a momentary escape.

“It was a big opportunity for me to branch out,” Martin said. “It’s definitely challenging my skill set, joining forces with artists whose work is so different from my own. It’s been a huge learning experience in collaboration.”

The varying backgrounds of those involved—from architects, community organizers, and entrepreneurs to tattoo artists, filmmakers, and painters—results in a vivid sensory experience that also strikes an emotional chord with just about everyone who visits.

“It’s been so cool to watch that transformation happen as they move through this space,” Karper said. “You can see there’s a change happening in people, there’s a sense of wonder and playfulness that maybe people don’t tap into on a regular basis.”

She and the other members of Factory Obscura want to take it to a much larger scale. SHIFT is what Karper calls the group’s “proof of concept”—a jumping off point for something bigger. The group achieved its initial \$50,000 funding goal in November and has seen more than 3,300 visitors since the exhibit opened that month. The group’s ultimate objective is to create a permanent home in Oklahoma City that will host large-scale, ever-evolving installations in a space of around 50,000 square feet. They plan to open the first phase in 2020.

Karper is also looking at ways to take SHIFT on the road as a traveling exhibit to share with communities across the state. In the meantime, Current Studio visitors can traverse their higher consciousness at no cost through February 25.

In May 2018, AHHA will open “THE EXPERIENCE,” an artist-driven, fully immersive installation. But until then, Tulsans will need to hit I-44 for full-blown fantastical environs.

SHIFT is open Thursday–Sunday, noon–6 p.m., except Christmas Eve. Admission is free. Current Studio, 1218 N. Pennsylvania Ave., Oklahoma City. (405) 673-1218 or factoryobscura.com.

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