

Amway Center art celebrates Orlando



'Chitlin Circuit' by Everett Spruill is part of the Amway Center Art Collection. (Provided by Sports and the Arts / September 7, 2010)

By Matthew J. Palm
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When Everett Spruill attends an art show Tuesday night it will be his first look at the \$1 million **Amway Center Art Collection** in its

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He has more than a casual interest: He painted six of the pieces.

"It's a pretty big deal," Spruill said. "It's a great opportunity."

He'll be reunited with his creations Tuesday when the new Amway Center's artwork is officially unveiled to the artists in a private ceremony. The art isn't restricted to a specific gallery but is spread throughout the building. That means patrons may see different pieces each time they visit the center, depending on where their seats are, where they choose to eat, or even where they use the restrooms.

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Spruill paints brightly colored works in acrylics. His paintings show folks playing guitar or singing with a band, having a good time.

Works by other artists depict: hundreds of backstage passes arranged to create the image of cheering fans, a collage of labels from old orange crates, and the face of Magic superstar **Dwight Howard** in a contemplative pose.

"Most of the art focuses on the history of **Orlando**, or shows the types of events that will play in the building," said **Orlando Magic** president **Alex Martins** during a tour of the center shortly before it opened. "We want the building to be uniquely Orlando, and the art helps do that."

Events Center Development, the company created by the city and the Magic to develop the center, hired California-based art curator Sports and the Arts to assemble the Amway Center Art Collection. The collection of more than 340 works of art, including about 200 museum-quality photographs, goes above and beyond the public art required by city code for projects such as the center.

Helping make the art Central Florida-centric: 14 of the 21 artists who contributed to the collection are local, among them Spruill.

"I'm happy about it," said Spruill, 56, who has a studio in west Orange County. Then with an artist's pragmatism: "I hope it spurs some interest in my work and brings me some business. I hope the players see it."

Sports and the Arts found local artists the old-fashioned way, said project manager Camille Specia: She and her team visited galleries such as downtown's CityArts Factory, checked out local institutions such as **Crealde School of Art** and McRae Art Studios, both in **Winter Park**, and listened to recommendations. During their research, they discovered the Highwaymen, an artistic movement that began in the 1950s in which African-Americans use bright, bold colors to paint Florida landscapes.

"We said, 'Wow!'" Specia recalled. "Wouldn't it be really cool to get one of them?"

As luck would have it, they soon ran into Highwayman Roy McLendon at the Winter Park Farmer's Market, and he agreed to participate.

Specia said every artist they approached jumped at the chance to have their work hang in the Amway Center.

"They just wanted to be a part of it," she said. "The Orlando art scene really floored me. It is so vibrant here."

Some artists branched out from their usual style. At the request of Sports and the Arts, for example, McLendon painted his works on parquet flooring — used, of course, in basketball courts.

Memorabilia from downtown's old **Church Street Station** entertainment complex is also on hand. A sign for the Cheyenne Saloon & Opera House is displayed in an elaborate frame. Another wall decoration proclaims "Welcome to Rosie O'Grady's Flying Circus."

Photos from Orlando's bygone days are juxtaposed with more modern images in a "Then and Now" photography series.

The whole collection was assembled in a matter of months, which meant the artists were kept busy as each work was commissioned specifically for the center.

"Some of them we had running through the mill ... working day and night," Specia said.

"I could have used a little more time," Spruill said. He completed his six paintings in about three months. He usually spends a month on one piece. "It was a quick turnaround," he said.

Other local artists represented include inspirational painter Donna Dowless, collage artist Derek Gores, pop-art painter Phil Fung, mixed-media artist Ivaldo Robles and photographer Steve Vaughn.

Sports and the Arts, a family business owned by Specia's sister-in-law Tracie Specia-Ventura, has also curated the art in the Prudential Center in Newark, N.J.; the **Staples Center** in Los Angeles; and Yankee Stadium in New York.

Such facilities, which dress up their public spaces with art, are still the exception rather than the rule, Specia said.

"So many places don't think about what's going to go in the corridors," Specia said. "In Orlando, they did it right."

On the recent preview tour, Martins of the Magic said the artwork helps elevate the stature of the new Amway Center beyond its predecessor.

"The old arena was a place for people to assemble," Martins said. "This is an entertainment complex."

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