

# NEWCITYART



## Chicago Icons: The Fine Arts of SubCity by Candida Alvarez

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**Solon Spencer Beman was a renowned nineteenth-century architect** of the Pullman Company factory and adjoining planned community. He was hired in 1885 to design a steel-frame eight-story factory and display showroom by the Studebaker Brothers Carriage Company of Fort Wayne, Indiana. This architectural gem at 410 South Michigan Avenue was completed in 1887, with east-facing oversized glass windows filling the lower floors with light and spectacular views that reached from Grant Park to Lake Michigan. By 1895, the thriving business moved to a ten-story building, also designed by Beman, at 623 South Wabash Avenue (which would be acquired by Columbia College Chicago in 1983).

By 1898, renovations to the building on Michigan Avenue, renamed the Fine Arts Building, turned it into a ten-story building complete with a top floor space, dubbed Curtiss Hall after its designer, Charles C. Curtiss. The tenth floor has painted murals that

face the elevator lobby. The building also now featured music studios that were soundproofed, craft studios with sinks and general use offices. The ground floor was transformed into The Studebaker Theater alongside a music hall that is again in use today.



*Inside the 10th floor studio. "Black Cherry Pit 2," 14 x 11 inches, color pencils on vellum, 2010. "Black Cherry Pit," 84 x 72 inches, acrylic and enamel on canvas, 2009. Courtesy of Monique Meloche gallery.*

**I moved to Chicago in 1998 to teach at SAIC in the Painting Department.** I heard about the Fine Arts Building years before I actually moved in. I went there to visit a studio to see the work of a painting student, as part of their final critique. Years later, in October of 2003, I moved downtown, and could walk to my new studio inside Room 412 and a smaller storage space in Room 473, located in the adjacent building. It faced east, two large glass windows wide, with a ceiling height of twelve feet. I had to get used to taking the attended twin glass-door elevator which still operates. It was the only way up, as the lobby stairwell was kept locked for security. The building was not modernized, but it was sturdy and had a cozy atmosphere. There were bare bulbs in the hallways. I watched the clouds move across the infinite blue expanse of sky or disappear into the endless darkness of night. I was fascinated with this eastward view of the city that was both breathtaking and sobering. Bodies moved fast or leisurely, depending on the time of day. The buses had ID numbers that you could see only from above. The landscaping was so tidy. In the stillness of night, as I worked late often, an idea ripened for an exhibition space.

As I looked for a potential setting, I knew I did not want it to be a conventional gallery space, but it had to have a glass window.

I wanted to push the bar for myself and for the artists I invited. I was clear that I wanted the artist to risk comfort and accept it as a challenge to push how they made or thought about their practice. After speaking to Tom Graham, the then-owner of the building, he invited me to take a look at an empty elevator carriage parked on the eighth floor. Although it was filled with files, it was a clean space, already painted white. All I wanted was to hang an electric bulb and add two electrical power outlets. The twin glass doors already had a lock to keep them closed on the outside. I had a vast working list of artists to tap, so it went live shortly thereafter.



*SubCity Projects with Joyce Pensato's Donald Duck*

**SubCity Projects was born.** I named the space after listening to the words sung by Tracy Chapman in the song "SubCity" on her "Crossroads" album. She described exactly what I could sense and feel, witnessing that view from my studio that moved from picture-perfect to a community of homeless survivors that many folks, local and tourist

alike, would never see. It was both privileged and heartbreaking. Here I was in a building of interdisciplinarity from the nineteenth century. I could hear opera and voice lessons, violins being tuned and music recitals, and the prize was being there for a tap-dancing convention in Curtiss Hall filled with students practicing alongside piano rehearsal. SubCity Projects lived inside this space from 2004 to 2005. Some of those artists that said yes included: Steve Cordero, Raél Jero Salley, Saya Woolfalk, Dianna Frid, Sumakshi Singh, Tania Bruguera, Anna Jóelsdóttir, Amy Vogel and Kim Mitseff.



*Alvarez and some of the artists inside the SubCity Projects space*

The Grahams sold the Fine Arts building in 2005, after owning it for twenty-six years. The new owners had me close down SubCity Projects soon after. In the meantime, I was invited to be part of the Dark Fair in Cologne, curated by the Reeder Brothers. I created glow-in-the-dark paintings to surround the artist Cherry Daiquiri, whom I invited to give psychic readings. I moved up to the tenth floor in the Fine Arts in 2009 and leased 1036-38. As half of the original Lorado Taft downtown studio, another rendition of SubCity Projects was born. Since the studio had two access doors to the hallway, I was able to build around one of them and create a smaller, enclosed space that also provided a window view. I ran the space from 2009 to 2010. Joyce Pensato came in from New York and inaugurated the space by creating a drawing of Donald Duck, her first showing in Chicago. Barbara Kasten created her first video piece, Sabina Ott filled the space with video and Styrofoam sculpture, her first exhibition in Chicago, and Rebecca Keller

showed there. Tyson Reeder created a sweater painting, and then invited artists to work on top of it. I also invited some of my graduate students, including Cameron Welch and Timothy Bergstrom.

**Candida Alvarez** is an American artist and professor, known for her paintings and drawings. Her work has been collected by the Art Institute of Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Whitney Museum, San Jose Museum of Art, Pérez Art Museum, Miami, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Addison Gallery of American Art, Baltimore Museum of Art, among others. Alvarez was recently granted the Arts and Letters Award in Art by the American Academy of Arts and Letters and is a 2022 recipient of a Latinx Artist Fellowship. Alvarez is an alum of the Yale School of Art, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and is currently the F.H. Sellers Professor in Painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she has taught since 1998. Alvarez is represented by Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago and Gavlak LA | Palm Beach.