

Profitable artists: Career creatives find opportunities to earn a living in Baton Rouge

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“Starving” doesn’t have to be synonymous with “artist.”

Indeed, establishing a career as an artist is challenging. Incomes fluctuate from year to year. It takes time to hone skills and build a following. Many creatives don’t have formal training in accounting or marketing.

But opportunities for Baton Rouge’s career artists seem to be improving, as the four artists profiled here would seem to indicate. Larger and more diverse audiences are taking advantage of an expanding arts scene. The decade-old Shaw Center for the Arts is now home to multiple arts organizations, some of them grassroots. The Walls Project has helped numerous public murals, and the new Elevator Projects brings original artwork to pop-up installations.

Events such as the Surreal Salon at the Baton Rouge Gallery, Forum 35’s Art Melt, the Mid City Merchants Association’s White Light Nights and the Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge’s monthly Arts Market, which attracted 62 artists in May, are also making

art accessible and keeping artists busy. The Arts Council's annual festival, Fest-for-All, drew 91 artists from 16 states this spring, who earned an average of \$2,500 over two days.

"There is no question that Baton Rouge is changing in a positive way in terms of the arts," says artist George Marks, a painter with a national following who spent most of his career in Baton Rouge. A decade ago, Marks moved to home Arnaudville, where he has been instrumental in its transformation as an arts and cultural district. "I'm blown away by how much has changed here," he says of the Capital City.

One of downtown Baton Rouge's most recent developments, the 11,500-square-foot Creative Bloc at North Eighth and Main Streets, rents office space specifically to creative businesses, including audio, film, design, photography and graphic art. Meanwhile, the Manship Theatre is staging more performances in its main and ancillary performance spaces than ever, says Executive Director Renee Chatelain. Louisiana's Division of the Arts has identified eight cultural districts in the Capital Region, including five in Baton Rouge.

South Louisiana's thriving film industry, despite controversy among Louisiana legislators over its generous tax credits, has made it possible for industry professionals like Michael Papajohn, a stunt man and action movie actor, to live and work in Baton Rouge rather than Hollywood.

"I've been working like never before," says Papajohn, a former LSU baseball player who has been acting since 1987. "I've worked more here than I've worked anywhere."

Still, local leaders and arts professionals acknowledge there is significant room for improvement in the way the Capital Region fosters the arts as economic development, especially as Baton Rouge attempts to attract the so-called creative class. Traditional small businesses, technology startups and culinary ventures find support through entities like the Louisiana Business and Technology Center, the Louisiana Technology Park and the LSU AgCenter Food Incubator.

Yet while the arts are expanding, no business accelerator exists that specifically targets artists.

“We have quite a lot of activity around artists,” says Adam Knapp, president and CEO of the Baton Rouge Area Chamber. “The next horizon is likely the infrastructure development and the business development of the arts.”

It’s badly needed, some arts leaders say. Chatelain says that artists in the Capital Region don’t get market value for their work.

“People think nothing of paying high ticket prices for sporting events, along with lots of money spent on food and entertainment around the game, but complain about seeing any live performance if it costs more than \$20, or shy away from purchasing visual art that may exceed \$1,000,” she says. “For artists who are talented and who want to live by ‘doing their art,’ other markets outside of the Capital City area are more financially and creatively appealing.”

Sherri McConnell, an independent consultant and expert in the field of entertainment economic development, says it benefits everyone when communities see the arts as an industry.

“Fundamentally, the community—and that means the business community—needs to recognize artists as part of the economy,” McConnell says. “The jump from artist to businessperson is a hard one, and communities have to ask, ‘How do we help get their products to market?’”

Read about four career creatives who have found opportunities to earn a living in Baton Rouge, as well as how local corporate collections are building demand for fine art.

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