

Scott Family Amazeum

Makers in Residence complement creative ensemble

Improvisation. In the context of music, theater and poetry, improv is a spontaneous exercise in creativity driven by a performer alone or as part of a group. There is another definition of improvisation – applying creativity to design, develop and produce something new.

The Scott Family Amazeum in Bentonville melds these two definitions to build a shared design studio space where ideas come to life. “Our fabrication shop is at the core of who we are,” Sam Dean, Amazeum executive director, says. Physical space to support curiosity, creativity and a community of makers is central to the Amazeum’s mission, according to Dean. The fabrication shop at the museum is integral to the museum not only as a place where interactive experiences are repaired and created for the museum, but also as a place where diverse Makers in Residence find a home to improvise

in collaboration with the Amazeum creative team. By design, the workshop is the beating heart of an active, vibrant, idea-rich cultural institution.

During the past year, a diverse group of creatives, each bringing unique talents to the ensemble at the Amazeum, called the museum home as Makers in Residence, thanks to support from the Walton Family Foundation. “We’re working often with participatory artists who like to create interactive, physically immersive experiences. For us, maker residency is a little bit of a misnomer. We’re doing more of a maker collaborative,” Dean says.

Artists Jason Jones and Amanda Willshire collaborated with the Amazeum creative team to produce interactive art that explores the intersection of science, technology, engineering, art and math (STEAM). Jones’ mural *Interplay: Bugs and Bulbs* in the Amazeum’s main hallway is

an example. Jones worked with the Amazeum creative team to design an experience that blended techniques of traditional art with technology in developing a process in which paint and LED lights interact to add movement and dimension to the mural. “The Amazeum is so good at saying ‘Let’s try something new’ and encourages crossovers of art and science,” Jones says.



Artist Amanda Willshire (center) and Amazeum creative team with *The Incredible Electric Technicolor Mockingbird*. (Photo by Lisa Mac Photography)



City leaders and Amazeum team celebrate *Rainbow Springs* installation at Lawrence Plaza in Bentonville. (Photo by Christine Pendry)

Amanda Willshire’s residence at the Amazeum resulted in *The Incredible Electric Technicolor Mockingbird*, an interactive sculpture on the Amazeum grounds. Willshire wanted the sculpture to be an interactive experience. The team introduced her to another Maker in Residence, Eugene Sargent of Fayetteville, and along with the Amazeum creative team, they developed “mock-back” technology enabling people to interact verbally with the sculpture.

And, the sculpture can verbally interact with people. “The Makers in Residence that we bring in create experiences that have many layers,” says Erik Smith, Amazeum director of exhibits and facilities. “Whether it’s an artistic layer, interactive layer, or aesthetic layer, it is a collaborative effort of us learning from artists and artists learning from us to strengthen each other in the process of creating new experiences.”

The latest interactive piece to emerge from the Amazeum creative team and Maker in Residence program is *Rainbow Springs*, recently installed at Lawrence Plaza in downtown Bentonville. This interactive sculpture contains motion sensors to activate LED lights that react to people playing near the sculpture. *Rainbow Springs* grew out of Sargent’s long-term residency at the Amazeum.

“People in our workshop have lots of different backgrounds and areas of focus. Add in someone like Eugene, who is there testing ideas, and members of the creative team throwing in ideas, and this conversation sparks exploration and creativity. The spark for *Rainbow Springs* was Eugene playing with a single light strip and seeing if it could be programmed to do certain behaviors as a side project,” Smith says. Jason Quail, Amazeum

experimental projects developer, said “Wouldn’t it be cool if there were a lot of these?” And the project lit up the imaginations of the team.

Like an improv jazz ensemble, the Amazeum creative team and Makers in Residence build off each other’s skills to do interesting work in an environment driven by curiosity and creativity. “Everyone in the fabrication shop builds off their strengths because there’s a group of folks around testing ideas,” Dean says. “They get a moment of solo time to run with an idea, but then come back together,” Smith adds.

The Makers in Residence complement the expertise already found in a diversely skilled creative team with knowledge of producing interactive experiences. “The engineering that’s needed to produce something that’s both highly interactive and highly durable is a different skill set than most artists have experience with. Our experience helps anticipate how people will interact with a piece in a public setting,” Smith says.



Artist Jason Jones works on *Interplay: Bugs and Bulbs* in Amazeum main hallway. (Photo by Christine Pendry)

Artist Eugene Sargent and Willshire prototype “mock back” technology at Tinkerfest. (Photo by Christine Penury)

“We’re trying to add to the creativity in the region by wrapping more folks into participatory experiences rich in art and science, whether at the Amazeum or embedded in their neighborhood,” Dean says. Whether an improv jazz artist, entrepreneur, inventor, scientist or student, people are driven by ideas and imagination. In the Amazeum fabrication shop, ideas and imagination become tangible through hard work and collaboration, with a little improvisation thrown in for good measure. ■

Visit www.amazeum.org for more information.

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