

Arts: Features

Nova 535 shoots for the stars

A glitzy new space in St. Pete for parties and art.

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Tampa's ever-struggling visual arts community has gotten a welcome jolt recently from a series of events with jaw-dropping attendance. January's *Retro Perspectives*, the final blowout bash at the old Tampa Museum of Art building before its destruction began earlier this month, attracted several thousand revelers with a street art-bedecked façade and galleries filled with art-of-the-moment. *Dirty But Sophisticated 4*, a hybrid art-and-fashion show featuring some of the same artists, filled Ybor nightclub Czar with a diverse crowd an order of magnitude smaller but still impressive. And two weeks ago, new venue Nova 535 scored with a heavily attended red carpet opening that would make most area art institutions green with envy.

All of which has me wondering: Does it still make sense to talk about the Bay area as a place where an audience for contemporary art just won't materialize (as much behind-the-scenes grumbling would suggest)? Or have certain events and venues -- and maybe even individual artists and curators -- discovered a brand of hip artsy cachet that local folks have been waiting for?

If "sexy" -- to use a term he favors -- were gold, Michael S. Novilla has hit paydirt with Nova 535. The 39-year-old owner-entrepreneur is marketing his new project, a 2-story building on the northwest end of downtown St. Petersburg, as a luxury event venue with dashes of art gallery, nightclub and boutique hotel. Originally built in the 1920s, the building housed a pet store before Novilla purchased it in 2006 and spent over a year uncovering its original features (clay brick walls, hand-cut wood trusses) and adding new ones (a granite-topped bar and flat-screen TVs). As for the paintings that hang from the walls on a custom pulley system designed by the owner himself, Novilla likens them to couture on a "sexy skeleton."

"The buzz we're hearing is that this is the next best bar mitzvah spot," says Drew Edwards, a friend and advisor to Novilla who has been on board since the project's start. Edwards says they've been contacted about booking Super Bowl parties for the next two years, even though Nova 535's Brazilian hardwood floors have yet to be installed.

Their goal is to tap the local market for hip, high-end event venues while giving something back to the community. The giving-back part includes art receptions once a month and development in an area in need of revitalization. But Nova 535 is emphatically a for-profit venture, and Novilla, who also owns a network of properties called Crescent Lake Apartments near downtown, is quick to assert that he's not a trust-fund heir or a philanthropist.

"I'm playing with real money," says the USF MBA -- and he plans to make it back. With the aim of competing with venues like the Vinoy for corporate crowds and weddings, Novilla has seemingly spared no expense in outfitting the space with luxe trimmings. Travertine marble in 10 oversized bathrooms? Done. Two steel staircases designed by a local artist to subtly evoke the Paris Metro's art nouveau entrances? Got 'em. A catering kitchen and optional concierge services to fulfill the client's every whim? Ready to take your order.

Well, almost. The 7,000-square-foot space still requires a few finishing touches (like those hardwood floors), but Novilla says the details will be complete by the March 1 opening of *Heavenly Creatures*,

curated by Vanessa Fernandez and featuring Marguerite Sauvage, Andrew Spear, Dolceq and other artists. Visitors to the red-carpet opening two weeks ago were treated to some serious scenesterism -- a literal red carpet with a photographer snapping group photos *gratis* and complimentary food and wine -- but the artwork was an uneven mix of submissions, sent in response to an open call to artists.

To their credit, Novilla and Edwards say they won't try to be curators. From now on, they'll be bringing in more experienced art organizers like Fernandez, who curated DBS4. But Novilla's vision guides the space, and the owner says he was tired of viewing art only in the "sterile and boring" conditions of museums and galleries. Determined to create something more like the carefully crafted hipster exoticism he had experienced during a trip to Europe -- where he and Edwards attended a rave in a Spanish castle and watched the sun come up in a Gaudí-esque club on the Black Sea -- he hatched the concept of a high-end art lounge for his hometown.

When asked what kind of artwork he'd ideally like to see in the space, Novilla dreams big: (Japanese pop art superstar) Takashi Murakami or something along those lines, he says. In April, Nova 535 *will* step it up with a show featuring work by Jay Giroux and Theo Wujcik. From there, Nova's fate depends on whether Novilla can keep the hype going -- and score one for the Bay area's arts community as well as himself.

info

Heavenly Creatures

Runs March 1-31, with an opening reception Sat., March 1, 7 p.m. Nova 535, 535 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. St. N., St. Petersburg, 727-821-6682, nova535.com.

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