

MAY

## BROOKLYN BRIDGE 1999

## Spice Warehouse Gets Artsy

SMACK MELLON STUDIOS FIND SUCCOR SMACK DAB IN THE MIDDLE OF DUMBO

**T**HEY'RE THINKING HUGE at Smack Mellon Studios.

The experimental arts organization, which began holding informal get-togethers in a DUMBO loft four years ago, is turning an old spice warehouse between the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges into what the would-be impresarios hope will someday rival P.S. 1, in Queens.

Volunteers are busy sprucing up the multilevel, 17,000-square-foot space at 56 Water St. for the May 1 opening, with an exhibition featuring works exploring political and social aspects of the color red. Panels of sheetrock are being installed, walls lathered with paint and floors polished to a shine. But some remnants of the warehouse's former life will always remain.



Andrea Reynosa, the studio's take-charge executive director, points up to the hard-to-reach crossbeams, which are caked with layers of a dark reddish substance, and observes, "We will always have the spice."

A perfectly apt statement for such a zesty arts group.

Since its founding in 1995, Smack Mellon Studios has been showcasing boundary-stretching art created by artists from DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass). The project grew out of the personal relationship between Reynosa, a sculptor, and Kevin Vertrees, a musician, now the parents of two children. The two hosted art shows at their Plymouth Street loft in DUMBO; Reynosa would invite visual artists to display their

works, while Vertrees would encourage musicians to perform. Within a year, they began plotting how to formalize the series.

Vertrees, a computer programmer with experience in the corporate world, began applying for grants and seeking nonprofit status for a multidisciplinary showcase for unrecognized artists. "We were getting the

**Smack Mellonites Jeff Howe (left); Andrea Reynosa and Kevin Vertrees (below, with children); and Claude Gaskin, a spice factory veteran (right).**



people with money on our side," he says.

In February 1998, the duo opened an exhibition and work space at 81 Washington Street, in a 10,000-square-foot site owned by DUMBO developer David Walentas. In its first year, the studio held three visual-arts exhibitions, three cabarets, a Swedish-dance performance and numerous musical presentations.

One exhibition was curated by respected painter and School of Visual Arts professor Joan Snyder. Another mixed video, film projection and sculpture to create a layered, multisensory viewing experience. Yet another included work by the influential feminist artist Harmony Hammond, whose politically and sexually charged creations are rarely shown in New York.

After its opening, Smack Mellon Studios established itself, along with the Gale Gates et al. theater company and the DUMBO Arts Center, as a major arts

institutions in the neighborhood.

Then developer Walentas, who is hoping to transform industrial DUMBO into a community attractive to prospective residents, upped the ante by offering Smack Mellon a new location on Water Street. It was an offer Reynosa, Vertrees and the studio's board were loath to pass up. But, once



again, money was needed. "Everybody's broke," says Reynosa. "We're not rich kids doing this." After donations from Forest City Ratner Companies, the Jerome Foundation, which offers funds to emerging art groups, and other organizations, a group of volunteers began cleaning out the spice warehouse.

The expansive complex will include conference rooms, exhibition spaces, video-installation rooms, recording facilities and studios for six artists-in-residence. It is intended as a venue where musicians and sculptors, painters and video artists can come together to create contemporary art of fresh moment.

The artist-in-residence program will allow artists to produce work that can later be shown in the space. The high-ceilinged main exhibition hall will provide enough room for ambitious sculptors to create objects that reach to the rafters. The large studios on the upper floors will be used as classroom space, with the artists-in-residence serving as instructors.

"We see this as becoming an important place for a generation of artists," says Reynosa, who exudes can-do verve. "Maybe more than a generation of artists." —PD