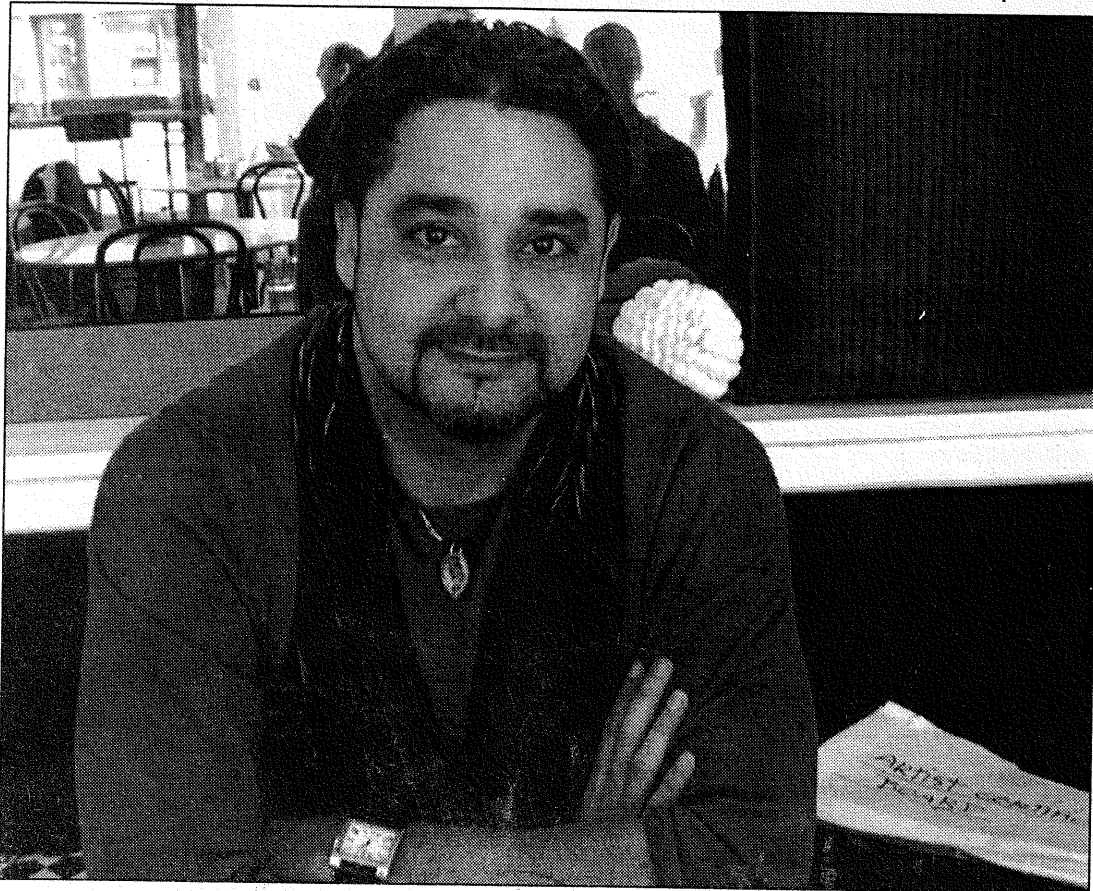


Think you're an artist? They'll see about that

*Artist Certification Board will choose who can
apply for new artists' lofts*



CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD – Duda Penteado, chairman of the Artist Certification Board. Photo by Christopher Zinsli.

By Christopher Zinsli
Reporter staff writer

Unless you've tried applying for specially priced artists' housing in Downtown Jersey City, chances are you've never heard of the Artist Certification Board.

Their meetings are open to the public, but the public hardly ever attends. Even some of the city's most well-connected artists are in the dark as to the board's workings.

Despite their relative anonymity, the Artist Certification Board (ACB) has the power to subtly shape the city's cultural base for years into the future.

By deciding who does – and who doesn't – qualify as a professional artist under the city's 1996 WALDO (Work And Live District Overlay) ordinance, the ACB plays a quiet but important role in influencing who moves into the Powerhouse Arts District (PAD), the roughly 10-block Downtown neighborhood anchored by the old Hudson & Manhattan Powerhouse on Washington Boulevard.

"We serve as an expertise team," said Duda Penteado, current chairman of the ACB. "We come and say, 'Yeah, these people are qualified.'"

Anyone hoping to enter the lottery pool for reduced-

cost work/live spaces in the PAD must first withstand the ACB's scrutiny.

The next such lottery – for seven units at 159 Second St. – is tentatively scheduled for February of 2007, said Rose M. Wagner, project manager for the Department of Housing, Economic Development and Commerce.

Current and former board members said the ACB protects the integrity of the arts district.

The board ensures "that we don't have people who get excited because they see the possibility of cheap housing and all of a sudden want to pretend to be an artist, when they're not really," said Leon Yost, a former chairman of the ACB.

Poised for attention

The ACB's anonymity may not last much longer.

Numerous residential projects are currently in some stage of development within the PAD, each of which is required under the 1996 ordinance to set aside a portion of their units for working artists.

That means an unknown number of additional artists will approach the ACB for certification over the next few years.

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If the vision of the PAD as Jersey City's cultural centerpiece is fully realized, the ACB will have to ensure that everyone they give the go-ahead to apply for the work/live spaces is actually a working artist who needs the space.

The ACB has already started preparing for an influx of applications.

With the designation of the Powerhouse Arts District in late 2004, the length of time for which an artist's certification is valid was doubled from five years to 10 years. The move meant less time spent for the ACB re-certifying artists and a bigger pool of artists who are eligible for the housing.

Inside the ACB

The board's five commissioners are appointed by the mayor to an initial two-year term and subsequent four-year terms, Penteado said. Commissioners are traditionally selected from a mixture of the city's six wards, he said.

Meetings are held the first week of every month on the 14th floor of 30 Montgomery St.

Current and former board members are quick to note that accepting a position on the ACB means signing up for a lot of unpaid work.

"It's a pain in the a— for people!" said Charles Kessler, the board's first chairman, who is no longer on the board. "It's a volunteer job, like the Planning Board. I'm amazed that the city gets really good, dedicated people to be on these boards."

Penteado said it's often simply a love for the arts that compels commissioners to accept the mayor's appointment.

"We don't make a penny," he said. "I'm there because I believe Jersey City finally is getting to a point where it's intertwining the arts with the fabric of the city. I want to be a part of that."

Meet the board

Duda Penteado, chairman – A fine artist whose work graces the walls of City Hall, Penteado was appointed to the ACB by Acting Mayor L. Harvey Smith. He is also director of programming and fine arts for The Hope Center Academy.

Margaret Weber, vice chair – A retired teacher, printmaker, and mixed media artist, Weber moved to Jersey City from New York in the 1970s. She is also a curator for several

When weighing an artist's application, commissioners adhere to a six-point checklist laid out for them in the 1996 ordinance:

- 1) Commitment to the fine arts as a career
- 2) Need for a large loft space
- 3) An arts education
- 4) Current body of work
- 5) Exhibition record
- 6) References from other artists or art professionals

Once the board has looked over an application, the voting process is usually cut-and-dried, commissioners said.

"If you pass three of those categories," Penteado said, "then you are approved."

The ACB's recommendations are then passed on to the Planning Board, who either approves or rejects the board's recommendations. But so

public-art exhibits around the city.

Linda DeAngeles – DeAngeles has been a mixed-media artist for nearly a decade and a resident of Jersey City for more than 50 years.

Susana Falconi – The daughter of a well-known Ecuadorian painter, Falconi has been a painter herself for 10 years.

Leila Bowie – A longtime photographer, Bowie has exhibited in shows in New York City and elsewhere.

Alternates: Mary Jean Guadiello and Frank Bosco.

far, they've always approved, commissioners said.

Who makes the cut – and who doesn't?

In addition to fine artists, the ACB has certified poets, actors and composers, Yost said. But they've rejected gardeners and sushi chefs.

"They're not bad people," Yost said. "It's just that they don't fit into this particular cate-

gory that the district was designed around."

It's often simply a lack of supporting documentation – such as exhibition brochures, playbills or CD covers – that gets an application kicked back to the artist. In these cases, artists are allowed to submit additional information.

Another common reason for rejecting an application, commissioners said, is that the applicant is primarily a commercial artist, not a fine artist.

Penteado recalled rejecting the application of a talented commercial artist: "She did wonderful things for Coca-Cola, commercial stuff, merchandizing," he said. "And I go, 'Listen, this is wonderful, but this is [work] you've been hired for. Where is your fine-art stuff?'"

Some other applications have required a bit of investigative work.

"One artist had a wide range of work – it looked like it was done by three or four different artists," Kessler said. "So that sent up a warning bell to us that this guy just gets slides from different people and submits them [as his own]."

But when commissioners took a trip to the artist's studio, Kessler said, they realized they had been mistaken.

"Turned out, he was just a very talented artist that did a variety of things," Kessler said.

In the end, the ACB must make decisions that contribute to an active arts district, Penteado said. □

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