

City NOTES

ON ARTS AND
ENTERTAINMENT

Company man

Curator makes corporate office into a daring exhibition space.

By ROBERT COZZOLINO

When faced with the prospect of visiting an art gallery in Fitchburg's Promega Corp., and specifically something called the BioPharmaceutical Technology Center at 5445 East Cheryl Parkway, I shuddered while coasting down Fish Hatchery Road in a borrowed station wagon. Bio-anything kinda gives me the willies. I thought of that eerie scene in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* where Richard Dreyfuss is being transported in a gas mask to the area around Devil's Tower; the ground is littered with dead animals due to the presence of some unseen deadly sciencey thing.

Phew. To my relief, Promega is much more homey than that. It is actually an intriguing alternative art space—the domain of Akron, Ohio-based curator **Daniel Swadener**, who organizes impressive exhibitions for the local corporation. Swadener sees the company's exhibition space as operating somewhere "between a gallery and a museum." The building opened in 1994, and in 1995 he did his first exhibition.

"I knew the CEO and president (**Bill Linton**) when he started Promega," says Swadener, originally a sculpture student at Indiana University-South Bend. "He invited me to look at the building under construction and suggested I do some exhibitions."

He usually mounts four or five shows a year. They hang for two or three months, and are open to the public during business hours. Promega subsidizes some of them, but for more

expecting to run in expecting to do business only to encounter a sculpture they can't ignore."

Sometimes Swadener deliberately leaves Promega's walls blank longer than usual to underscore this transformation and the role of art in the life of the space. "More and more, the workers are an integral part of what's going on in the installations," he says. "I look forward to their feedback. People who have been here for a while aren't afraid to tell me their likes and dis-

area overlooking the atrium is generally reserved for monumental paintings or installation art.

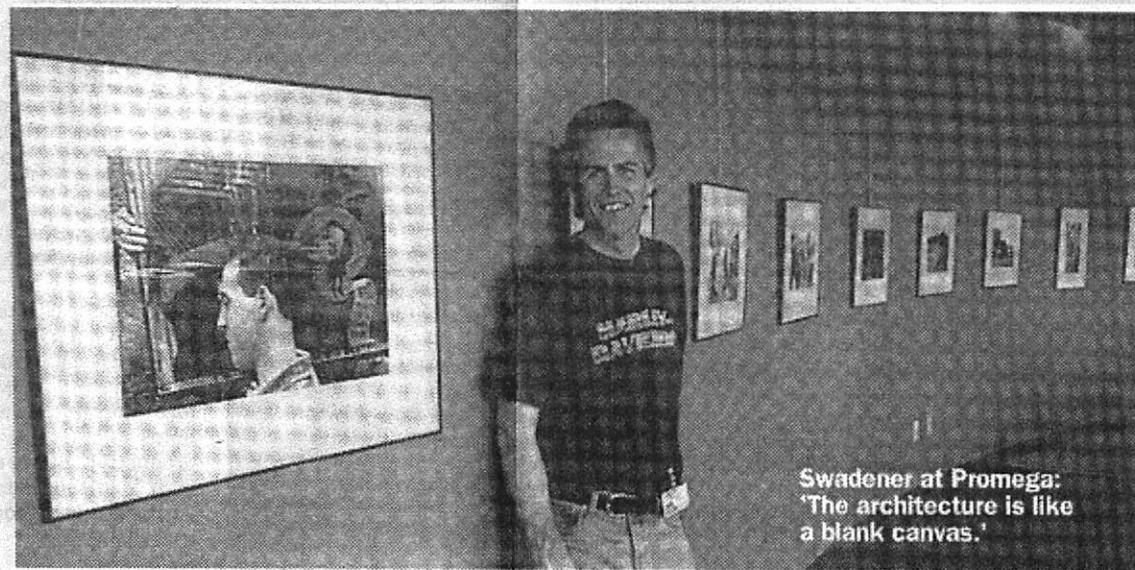
Swadener's group exhibitions often bring local, national and international artists together. Sometimes he pairs artists thematically, as in the recent exhibition "Religious Photography and Icons," which featured Greek photographer **Georgio Katsagelos** and Madison icon painter **David Giffey**. An earlier exhibition featured the Madison collective **Artbite**.

Swadener tries to give his artists a lot of leeway, and listens to their thoughts on the space before working. He does a lot of studio visits. "I prefer to do that rather than look at slides," he says. "It helps me understand their work."

Swadener is working on an outsider-artist exhibition that will feature work from Greece, France, Africa and the U.S. But he's most excited about the sprawling 33-venue photo festival he's spearheaded for March. Ranging from the Civic Center to Fyfe's Corner Bistro, photography exhibitions will hang in nearly every possible Madison art space over a period of around three weeks. Promega will present its own show in Fitchburg, linking the two

communities. Swadener hopes to have **John Szarkowski**, former curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art and one of the most prolific writers on the subject, to lecture in association with the show. Szarkowski will teach in the UW's art history department during the spring 2000 semester, and Swadener's festival coincides serendipitously with his visit.

Swadener sees himself as "a conduit between artist and audience," but he's also providing a nice link between Madison's outlying communities and the core of the city. ■



Swadener at Promega:
'The architecture is like
a blank canvas.'

ambitious undertakings, Swadener does his grantwriting homework.

Each exhibition changes the whole character of the space. Swadener is intrigued by the reactions of employees who come in after a new installation has been mounted and are faced with a transformed workplace. He will perch strategically in the atrium and observe how people interact with the work. "I love to watch people come in here, to see how the art changes their conceptions of the space. Most amusing are the delivery people or messengers, or those

likes. It helps me when I'm thinking about the next show to consider what works and what doesn't."

Swadener has a lot of freedom with how he uses the BioPharmaceutical Center. "The architecture is like a blank canvas, with artists dropping off raw materials for me to use in creating something unique," he says. The building features a light-bathed atrium that Swadener uses as a grand entranceway to introduce each show. Each installation is linked through various halls that wind deeper into the building. A mezzanine